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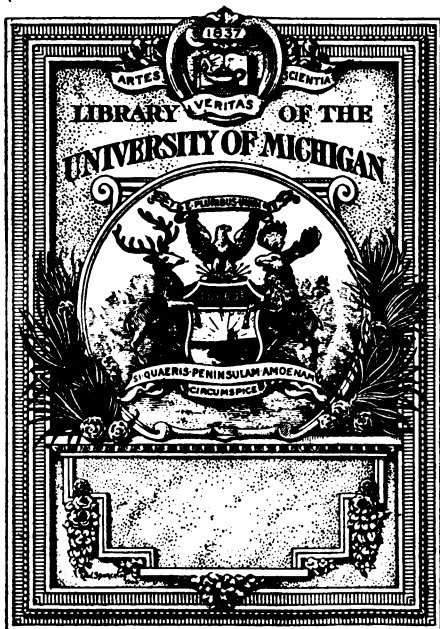
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OF CRITICISM*



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CURIOSITIES OF CRITICISM.

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CURIOSITIES OF CRITICISM

By HENRY J.^{ames}
= JENNINGS



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CURIOSITIES OF CRITICISM.

CHAPTER I.

THE UTILITY OF CRITICISM.

RITICS are not altogether a popular race. Their occupation, if it be honestly carried out, necessitates much fault-finding, and fault-finders are not universally liked. Critics have come to be thought, rightly or wrongly, exacting in their requirements, and exceedingly difficult to please; and people of this kind, whether in public or private life, are not, as a rule, much cared for. Your thoroughly popular man is he who likes everything, who is easily satisfied, who never grumbles, who sets up for himself no rigid standard of perfection, who is fettered by no severe canons of taste, and whose judgment is characterised by an elastic and accommodating comprehensiveness. Critics have, by common consent, come to be re-

garded as a species of grumblers. They have none of this genial tolerance for faults, none of this good-natured blindness to shortcomings. The very essence of their function, on the contrary, is to sit in judgment, and distinguish between what is praiseworthy and what is indifferent. They are, for this very reason, regarded with but little affection; perhaps even, so far as professional criticism is concerned, with something akin to dislike. Mr. Ruskin says very truly, "A strong critic is every man's adversary; men feel that he knows their foibles, and cannot conceive that he knows more. His praise, to be acceptable, must be always unqualified; his equity is an offence instead of a virtue; and the art of correction, which he has learned so laboriously, only fills his hearers with disgust." If this is true of the strong critic, what must be the effect of unfair criticism? This feeling of dislike has undoubtedly been increased by the errors of judgment, the sins of asperity, and the vices of ignorance of which critics have too often been guilty. Still the race is scarcely deserving of the harsh verdict which has become current, not only among those whose lot it is to be criticised, but among the hastily judging public, who, catching their tone from dissatisfied and resentful authors, heedlessly echo the cant

cry about the unfairness and incompetence of critics.

Critics are indispensable. It would be impossible, even if their faults were greater than they are, to do altogether without them. If criticism was useful in the days of the ancients, it is an absolute necessity in these times of a teeming press and multitudinous productions. It has grown with civilisation. As Literature, aided by the invention of printing, began to expand in influence, criticism asserted itself with corresponding vigour. Often coarse, often virulent, often inspired by envy and malice, yet it rapidly assumed a position of recognised authority, and shaped itself into a special department of letters, and subsequently of Art.

Before considering the question of the utility of critics, it may be worth while to inquire what criticism is. According to the etymological meaning of the word, it signifies the art of judging with correct taste. Since, however, instances have occurred of the irresponsible judges in Literature and Art being unable to hold the balance with fairness, and being deficient in that fine taste without which criticism, properly called, is impossible, it is clear that the term *critic* has undergone considerable abuse, and that it is frequently applied,

for want of another word, to persons whose function is rather cavilling than criticism, and who, in their rash and ill-considered judgments, are too prompt to condemn the beauties they are incompetent to appreciate. It will be necessary, for the present, to use the word in its widest signification, not simply as meaning the *art* of judging well, but rather the *business* of passing judgment. Matthew Arnold defines criticism as "a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world;" but although this definition fits in well enough with a lofty view of the functions of criticism in the abstract, it will scarcely serve as the basis of the more practical considerations to be dealt with in actual experience of critical work. Critics, to use a trite but useful simile, are public tasters. In olden times, corporations and townships had their ale-tasters, whose duty it was to sample the various brewings, and pass judgment upon their quality. Literature and Art have had their tasters in the same way, whose duty, none the less stringently performed because often self-imposed, it has been to try the various "taps," and pronounce on their potency or flatness, as the case might be. The parallel might be pursued still farther, and a comparison drawn between the ale-taster overcome with his

numerous potations, and the critic obfuscated with a mixture of intellectual draughts, some of them strangers to his palate, and others too strong for his unhappy brains. The inimitable Jean Paul Richter has an "analect" something to the same effect, though there is a humorous irony about it which shows that he, too, regarded the critics with little loving-kindness. "In Suabia, in Saxony, in Pomerania"—so runs the fable—"are towns in which are stationed a strange sort of officers—valuers of authors' flesh, something like the old market-lookers. They are commonly called tasters (or *prægustatores*), because they eat a mouthful of every book beforehand, and tell the people whether its flavour be good. We authors, in spite, call them *reviewers*; but I believe an action of defamation would lie against us for such bad words. The tasters write no books themselves; consequently, they have the more time to look over and tax those of other people. Or, if they do sometimes write books, they are bad ones; which, again, is very advantageous to them, for who can understand the theory of badness in other people's books so well as those who have learned it by practice in their own? They are reputed the guardians of literature and the *litterati*, for the same reason that St. Nepomuk is the patron-saint of bridges and of


all who pass over them—namely, because he himself lost his life from a bridge.”

To drop the figurative, it must be taken that these tasters of Literature and Art are a public necessity. In busy, anxious times like ours, when men are hurrying to and fro, intent upon business and pleasure, upon making money and spending it, and when the number of books written, pictures painted, and plays produced, is legion, it becomes indispensable that duly qualified persons should winnow the corn from the chaff, and instruct the public as to what is really worthy of their attention. Bacon says, “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.” The business of the critics is to taste them all, and to point out those which merit the fuller processes of mastication and digestion. No doubt one tendency of this is to induce, on the part of many of those who read criticisms and have faith in them, a habit of forming what may be called second-hand judgments, and to encourage—at all events in some cases—intellectual laziness. As Mr. Puff says in “The Critic,” “The number of those who undergo the fatigue of judging for themselves is very small indeed.” If the published opinion could, in all cases, be depended upon for its soundness and accuracy,

perhaps this result would not be altogether deplorable. Desirable as it is to encourage the formation of independent judgments, yet second-hand opinions, if they are correct opinions, are better than none at all. But when, as happens sometimes, the criticism is misleading, the people who accept it with unquestioning belief and reverence are in a very sad plight. There are a class of readers, careless, unthinking, receptive of false ideas, and tenacious in their hold of them—


“Who pin their easy faith on critic’s sleeve,
And, knowing nothing, everything believe.”

But nothing human is infallible; no system or science exists without its shortcomings and flaws. The evils of bad criticism are serious, but they do not weigh down the scale against the benefits of honest and thoughtful criticism. Abolish critics, and an important link would be broken which connects those who have but scant leisure for culture with the higher efforts of intellectual production. It would get rid, no doubt, of much that is faulty, misleading, and, in some instances, of attacks that are malevolent and unfair, but at the same time it would leave the helpless multitude to toss about, without compass or rudder or pilot, upon a sea beset with the




shoals and quicksands of worthlessness and error. Without the encouragement and aid which criticism gives to them, Literature and Art would be in danger of losing much of their hold upon that Philistine class who, largely absorbed in other pursuits, require such a stimulus as is afforded by the desire not to be ignorant of the chief intellectual work of their age, to draw them ever so little from their factories and their counting-houses. It is better, then, to have public "tasters," even though they should be occasionally false to their high and responsible duties, than that the masses should be deprived of those arbiters and guides who lure them from the grovelling routine of the scramble called "Life" to the feet of the great teachers of pen and pencil.

It is all very well for authors and others of established fame to pooh-pooh the advantages, and even to impugn the trustworthiness, of criticism; they are perhaps on too lofty a round of the ladder either for praise to elevate or detraction to harm them. A new volume of poems by Mr. Tennyson is sure to find its wide circle of admirers independently of anything the critics may say. When a Dickens, a Thackeray, or a "George Eliot" gets to the top of the tree, the intermediary influence of "press notices" is of no great con-



sequence to their fame, one way or the other. A thoughtful and appreciative criticism no doubt helps the sale of their books: probably any kind of notice adds to their publicity, and excites that curiosity which tempts to purchase. If it were not so, the publishers who speculate in the copyright would scarcely go to the trouble and expense of sending round "reviewers' copies" to all the leading newspapers and critical journals. Much as criticism is derided and scoffed at, every one seems mightily anxious to bespeak the notice of the critics. Bulwer Lytton wrote more than once to Mr. Macvey Napier, the then editor of the "Edinburgh Review," complaining that his books were not reviewed. Other authors, though less reticent, are just as discontented if the critics ignore them. Editors' tables creak with the weight of unsolicited volumes sent in the hope of obtaining some sort of public recognition. Next to getting a book published, the great point is to get it reviewed. Authors of world-wide reputation can afford, as has been already said, to be more indifferent about the matter, inasmuch as they know that some notice *must* be taken of them. They are too important, and they loom too large upon the appreciation of the public, to be ignored. But with the lesser lights



it is different. They stipulate with their publishers that the journals shall be supplied with copies of their new book. The burden of their cry is, "Review us! review us!" They prefer praise to condemnation, but, on the whole, perhaps they prefer even condemnation to silence. There is no crueller fate in the author's eyes than that of being carried down unnoticed to the great sea of Oblivion. "I would rather be damned outright," said a not obscure man of letters, "than be cold-shouldered by the critics." That may not be a universal feeling among authors and painters, musicians and actors, but there is a general desire on the part of "public men" and "professionals" to elicit some sort of opinion from the press. The publicity must be advantageous, or it would not be sought after. There must be some benefit, or hope of benefit, in it, or singers and players, writers and limners, would not all be inviting, day after day, that very criticism which they profess to disparage, and which they mostly declare to be conceited and ignorant.

The plea for the existence of critics may not be equally forcible in all cases. There are some, for instance, who think that critics might, with no great loss, be dispensed with in matters of

art. Mr. Whistler is one of these. In his little *brochure* on "Art and Art Critics," he admits himself one of those irrationals who would extinguish the *Art* critic altogether. "That writers should destroy writings to the benefit of writing is," he says, "reasonable. Who but they shall insist upon the beauties of literature, and discard the demerits of their brother *littérateurs*? In their turn they will be destroyed by other writers, and the merry game goes on till truth prevails." But the painter's work, he contends, should be received in silence, as it was in the days to which the penmen still point as an era when art was at its apogee. "And here we come upon the oft-repeated apology of the critic for existing at all, and find how complete is his stultification. He brands himself as the necessary blister for the health of the painter, and writes that he may do good to his art. In the same ink he bemoans the decadence about him, and declares that the best work was done when he was not there to help it. No! let there be no critics; they are not a 'necessary evil,' but an evil quite unnecessary, though an evil certainly. Harm they do, and not good." Curiously enough, the art-critic whose attack on Mr. Whistler's "Studies" was the ultimate cause of this tract being written,

has views only one remove less exacting with regard to art-criticism than those of Mr. Whistler himself. In a letter on the subject, included in "Arrows of the Chace," Mr. Ruskin writes:—"We are overwhelmed with a tribe of critics who are fully imbued with every kind of knowledge which is useful to the picture-dealer, but with none that is important to the artist. . . . Whatever, under the present system of study, the connoisseur of the gallery may learn or know, there is one thing he does *not* know,—and that is Nature. Alas for Art while such judges sit enthroned on their apathy to the beautiful and their ignorance of the true, and, with a canopy of canvas between them and the sky, and a wall of tradition, which may not be broken through, concealing from them the horizon, hurl their darkened verdicts against the works of men whose night and noon have been wet with the dew of heaven,—dwelling on the deep sea, or wandering among the solitary places of the earth, until they have 'made the mountains, waves, and skies a part of them and of their souls.'" A beautiful passage that, rich with the eloquent scorn which Mr. Ruskin has vials full of and to spare! Its meaning, simply put, is that no man should presume to pass judgment on another man's work, unless he possesses the special know-

ledge and the feeling which have inspired and guided the worker himself. Mr. Whistler says that he should not presume to pass judgment at all.

It is not, however, for the behoof of those criticised altogether that criticisms are written. Their real aim is, or should be, to assist the public. If they are really criticisms—that is, the thoughtful and impartial work of experts—they not only enable the great multitude of busy men and women to avoid what is worthless or injurious, but they constitute a considerable factor in the formation of a correct and refined public taste. Modern Literature is too prolific for any of us to keep pace with its innumerable productions. Of fiction alone hundreds of works are brought out annually, some few noteworthy, several of mediocrity, but most of them not worth the waste of one's time in reading. But for the critics, who wade through all this tedious stuff, how would the public know which were the few works worth taking home and reading as an intellectual luxury? If the reviewers of this kind of literature are no more than sorters, classifying the heterogeneous heaps of fiction that come before them, they are still indispensable. "The truth is," says Hazlitt in his "Table-Talk," "that in the quantity of works that issue from the press, it is utterly impossible they should all

be read by all sorts of people. There must be tasters for the public, who must have a discretionary power vested in them, for which it is difficult to make them properly accountable. Authors, in proportion to their number, become, not formidable, but despicable. They would not be heard of or severed from the crowd without the critic's aid, and all complaints of ill-treatment are vain."

Take the Drama, again. Thousands of people are not disposed to throw away their time and their money on a theatrical performance, unless they have learnt, from some one whose opinion is disinterested and can be trusted, that the expenditure would be justified by the results. An honest dramatic critic, then, is not only a faithful guide to his readers, but he indirectly helps to raise the tone of the stage. If there were no press censorship in matters theatrical, it is questionable to what the drama might not degenerate. By writing favourably of high-class pieces and artistic effort, the critic encourages the public to patronise the theatre; and when the manager finds that literary plays and fine acting fill his coffers, he gets the greatest of all stimulants to banish sensationalism, and indelicacy, and that witty vice which we have latterly taken to importing from our not-too-moral Gallic neighbours.

Critics, then, have their uses. No doubt, a bad critic is, as Mr. Ruskin says, "the most mischievous person in the world;" but the occasional abuse of a function does not prove that the function itself is harmful, nor does the incapacity of the few warrant the condemnation of the whole class. Mr. Ruskin also says that "criticism is as impertinent in the world as it is in a drawing-room."* If so, it is often a very beneficial sort of impertinence. Outspoken opinion, if it be temperate and reasonable, can do no harm, and it is possible that it may do a vast amount of good.

There is no reason why we should always be taking refuge behind a veil of conventional compliment. Critics are none the worse for now and then giving utterance to their judgments within the enchanted walls of the "Palace of Truth." Quoth Mr. Ruskin:—"In a kindly and well-bred company, if anybody tries to please them, they try to be pleased; if anybody tries to astonish them, they have the courtesy to be astonished; if people become tiresome, they ask somebody else to play, or sing, or what not, but they don't criticise;" and he implies that the same deferential treatment ought to be shown to those who, on the larger platform of the world, try to please or

* "Arrows of the Chace," vol. ii. p. 241.

astonish us. Even if Mr. Ruskin had been in the habit of practising what he preaches with such sublime inconsistency, his dictum could only be taken for what it is worth, and that is not very much. The amenities of private life are not necessarily the test of public conduct. If a man makes an ass of himself in a book, and insults the intelligence of the public by offering them his rubbish to read, why should he not be reminded that authorship is not his vocation? If a dull and stupid play is put upon the stage, why should not the public be told plainly that it *is* dull and stupid? Let us have the truth in these matters, and not gloss over foolishness and ugliness with the complaisance of drawing-room etiquette. It need not be brutal, or spiteful, or merciless in its scorn; it need only be the truth. If the critic tells that, and delivers his verdict with the calm and passionless honesty of an impartial judge, he renders a signal service to all who read what he writes.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT AUTHORS HAVE SAID ABOUT CRITICS.

IT is a common enough thing for people, and even educated people, to speak of critics, as a class, as if they were only a shade better than cut-throats and criminals. There is nothing so very surprising, it must be admitted, in the direction which popular opinion seems to have taken, for criticism has been held up to sufficient ridicule to have abolished it altogether, if it had not been, in a very large sense, a public necessity. The unpopularity of critics with the people criticised has found utterance in some of the most memorable phrases of our literature. Very likely it is not in human nature for those to love the smiter who have been smitten hip and thigh. The most enduring of modern Christians—Christianity being altogether a different thing now from what it was in the grand old Galilean days—would scarcely feel the impulse strong upon him to send his second volume to be reviewed by the

critic who had made mincemeat of his first. The victims of criticism in this less forgiving age, unmindful of the sweet spirit of submissive endurance taught by the meek-eyed Master, are not all so cheerfully ready to kiss the rod that has made them smart and cut deep into their *amour propre*. When no other means of retaliation have been available, the resentful epigram and the scathing retort have served the purpose of the sufferers. If the judgment of authors might be relied upon for strict impartiality, the poor critics would speedily be hounded out of court, without a leg to stand upon.

Lord Bacon said of them, that, "with all their pretensions, they are only brushers of noblemen's clothes." Sterne's declaration about the cant of criticism being the most tormenting of all the cants in this canting world, has passed into the currency of an everyday phrase. In Churchill's "Apology," addressed to the critical reviewers, these gentlemen are submitted to merciless treatment, the poet rending them with savage fury as a wild boar rends his foe:—

"A critic was of old a glorious name,
Whose sanction handed merit up to fame;
Beauties, as well as faults, he brought to view,
His judgment great, and great his candour too ;

No servile rules drew sickly taste aside ;
Secure he walked, for Nature was his guide.
But now, oh strange reverse ! our critics bawl
In praise of candour with a heart of gall ;
Conscious of guilt and fearful of the light,
They lurk enshrouded in the veil of night ;
Safe from detection, seize the unwary prey,
And stab, like bravoës, all who come that way."

The same writer pursues a similarly enraged strain in another poem, "The Candidate :"—

"What though they lay the realms of Genius waste,
Fetter the fancy and debauch the taste ;
Though they, like doctors, to approve their skill,
Consult not how to cure, but how to kill ;
Though, by whim, envy, or resentment led,
They damn those authors whom they never read ;
Though, other rules unknown, one rule they hold,
To deal out so much praise for so much gold.

Ours be the curse, the mean, tame coward's curse
(Nor could ingenious Malice make a worse
To do our sense and honour deep despite),
To credit what they say, read what they write."


Dr. Johnson, writing of critics in one of the "Ramblers," says, "There is a certain race of men that either imagine it their duty or make it their amusement to hinder the reception of every work of learning or genius, who stand as sentinels in the avenues of fame, and value themselves upon giving ignorance and envy the first notice of a prey."

Dean Swift's hatred of critics is well known. The mordant irony of the memorable "Digression concerning Critics" in "The Tale of a Tub" is not the least bitter of the many bitter things that have been written about them. He savagely says that "a true critic is a discoverer and collector of writers' faults," and furnishes three maxims which are "to serve both as characteristics to distinguish a true modern critic from a pretender, and also to be of admirable use to those worthy spirits who engage in so useful and honourable an art. The first is, that criticism, contrary to all other faculties of the intellect, is ever held the truest and best when it is the very first result of the critic's mind; as fowlers reckon the first aim for the surest, and seldom fail of missing the mark if they stay not for a second. Secondly, the true critics are known by their talent of swarming about the noblest writers, to which they are carried merely by instinct, as a rat to the best cheese, or as a wasp to the fairest fruit. Lastly, a true critic, in the perusal of a book, is like a dog at a feast, whose thoughts and stomach are wholly set upon what the guests fling away, and is consequently apt to snarl most when there are fewest bones."

And, with a coarser and savager humour, the Dean indulges in another diatribe against criticism

in "The Battle of the Books." This "malignant deity," as he calls her, "dwelt on the top of a snowy mountain in Nova Zembla ; there Momus found her extended in her den, upon the spoils of numberless volumes half devoured. At her right hand sat Ignorance, her father and husband, blind with age ; at her left, Pride, her mother, dressing her up in the scraps of paper herself had torn. There was Opinion, her sister, light of foot, hood-winked, and headstrong, yet giddy and perpetually turning. About her played her children, Noise and Impudence, Dulness and Vanity, Positiveness, Pedantry, and Ill-Manners. The goddess herself had claws like a cat ; her head and ears and voice resembled those of an ass ; her teeth fallen out before ; her eyes turned inward, as if she looked only upon herself ; her diet was the overflowing of her own gall ; her spleen was so large as to stand prominent like a dug of the first rate, nor wanted excrescences in form of teats, at which a crew of ugly monsters were greedily sucking ; and, what is wonderful to conceive, the bulk of spleen increased faster than the sucking could diminish it."

Pope, whose "Essay on Criticism" is admitted to have shown remarkable penetration and learning for so young a man as he was at the time of its composition—though, as Mr. Leslie Stephen points




out, the maxims it contains are, for the most part, the obvious rules which have been the common property of all generations of critics—exclaims:—

“Such shameless bards we have! and yet, ’tis true,
There are as mad, abandoned critics too.”

Elsewhere in the “*Essay*” he says:—

“But of the two, less dang’rous is the offence
To tire our patience than mislead our sense.
Some few in that, but numbers err in this;
Ten censure wrong for one who writes amiss.”

In his “*Essay on the State of Polite Learning*,” Goldsmith describes criticism as “its natural destroyer.” “The man who has any good-nature in his disposition must,” says Goldsmith, “be somewhat displeased to see distinguished reputations often the sport of ignorance—to see, by one false pleasantry, the future peace of a worthy man’s life disturbed, and this only because he has, unsuccessfully, attempted to instruct or amuse us. The critic enjoys the triumph, and ascribes to his parts what is only due to his effrontery. I fire with indignation when I see persons wholly destitute of education and genius indent to the press, and thus turn bookmakers, adding to the sin of criticism the sin of ignorance also,—whose trade is a bad one, and who are bad workmen in the trade.”



The caustic dictum of Lord Beaconsfield, that "critics are people who have failed in Literature and Art," whatever truth there may be in it, is not original. The same idea has been expressed by several authors. Congreve has the following couplet in the prologue to "The Way of the World":—

"Though they're on no pretence for judgment fit,
But that they have been damned for want of wit."

Dryden, in the prologue to "The Conquest of Granada," says:—

"They who write ill, and they who ne'er durst write,
Turn critics out of mere revenge and spite."

Pope says:—

"Some have at first for wits, then poets passed,
Turned critics next, and proved plain fools at last."

In Landor's "Imaginary Conversations" we find Porson saying, "Those who have failed as painters turn picture-cleaners—those who have failed as writers turn reviewers. Orator Henley taught in the last century that the readiest-made shoes are boots cut down; there are those who abundantly teach us now that the readiest-made critics are cut-down poets." And Southey expresses a somewhat similar idea when he says that "bad poets make

malevolent critics, just as weak wine turns to vinegar," and doubts whether any man ever criticised a good poem maliciously who had not written a bad one himself.

Peter Pindar, in a prefatory address "To the Reviewers" at the beginning of his works, sarcastically remarks, amongst other equally pleasant insinuations :—

"I ne'er averred you critics, to a man,
For pence would swear an owl excelled the lark ;
Nor called a coward gang your grave Divan,
That stabbed, like base assassins, in the dark."

Addison, in one of the "Spectators," has a few words on the subject. "The ancient critics," he says, "are full of the praises of their contemporaries. . . . On the contrary, most of the smatterers in criticism who appear among us, make it their business to vilify and depreciate every new production that gains applause, to decry imaginary blemishes and to prove, by far-fetched arguments, that what pass for beauties are faults and errors."

Young, referring to the critics of poetry, says :—

"Critics on verse, as squibs on triumph wait,
Proclaim the glory and augment the state ;
Hot, envious, rosy, proud, the scribbling fry,
Burn, hiss, and bounce, waste paper, ink, and die."

Hear, too, what Byron says :—

“A man must serve his time to every trade
Save censure—critics all are ready-made ;
Take hackneyed jokes from Miller, got by rote,
With just enough of learning to misquote ;
A mind well skilled to find or forge a fault ;
A turn for punning, call it Attic salt.

Fear not to lie—’twill seem a sharper hit ;
Shrink not from blasphemy—’twill pass for wit ;
Care not for feeling—pass your proper jest,
And stand a critic, hated yet caressed.

“And shall we own such judgments? No! as soon
Seek roses in December—ice in June,
Hope constancy in wind or corn in chaff,
Believe a woman or an epitaph,
Or any other thing that’s false, before
You trust in critics, who themselves are sore.”


Shenstone, in his “*Essays on Men and Manners*,” remarks that critics remind him of “certain animals called asses, which, by nibbling vines, taught men the advantage of pruning them.” Wordsworth called reviewing “an inglorious employment.” Southey, who subsequently became a reviewer himself, styled it “the ungentle craft.” Carlyle spoke of critics as “the flesh-flies of literature.” Tupper says, “Pens are poniards in their hands; an inkstand the fountain of detraction.” Tennyson speaks of “the chorus of indolent reviewers—irresponsible, indolent reviewers.” And Oliver

Wendell Holmes declares it to be "a blessed thing that Nature, when she invented, manufactured, and patented her authors, contrived to make critics out of the *chips* that were left."

Even any one, unfamiliar with the circumstances under which some of these bitter things were written, can very readily jump to the conclusion that they were inspired by the vengeful promptings of *lex talionis*. An author is "cut up," his most ambitious efforts are ridiculed, the results of his most diligent research are pronounced inaccurate;—is it any wonder that he should feel sore and vindictive, and should denounce with indiscriminate scorn the whole critic tribe? We are all very human, and when the judgment passed upon us seems unfair, or fails to do justice to our intentions, or is spiteful, or flippant, or "damns us with faint praise," we cannot always help rebelling against the authority that condemns us, and crying out, not only against this particular judge, but against all judges, as being ignorant, and prejudiced, and partial, and vowing that there is no such thing as fair appreciation and a due recognition of honest worth—no, not at all. There is a good deal of pugnacity in men of letters, and even authors whose works have won immortality *for them have not*, in many instances, thought it

beneath their dignity to launch out into angry reprisals when some anonymous scribe has given forth his depreciatory verdict.

It does not follow, though, that criticism deserves all the hard things that have been said of it. We hear very little about the other side of the account. When a writer is praised, he is in no hurry to admit that the judicious approbation of the critic has contributed to his fame. No! he puts it all down to his own merit. The critic has done no more than his duty; if he had done less, he would have been guilty of injustice. No record is published by authors of the good services which the critics have done them. Rarely indeed does any writer, or painter, or actor step frankly forward and say, "I owe to the timely appreciation of the press no small measure of my success." And yet the confession might be made in hundreds, nay, in thousands of cases. Granting that genius is sometimes able to dispense with such aids, and to fight its own way to recognition without them, still the records of Literature and Art are full of instances of men who must have had to struggle on through weary years of obscurity, if an appreciative estimate of their worth by some of these same despised critics had not brought them into notice and instructed the



public as to their quality. The fact is there are critics and critics. In the grumblings of authors, unfortunately, we hear only of one sort. They are all tarred with the same brush. No good thing, it is scornfully assumed, can come out of such a Nazareth. The detractors of criticism have had experience of only one side of it, and they judge from that, without regard to the possibility of there being another and a better side. They have been smitten and they are sore. *Hinc illæ lachrymæ!* Hence these railings and revilings!

CHAPTER III.

HYPERCRITICISM AND SLASHING CRITICISM.

THE critic's responsibility is a serious one. He is armed with tremendous strength. It is in his power with a few strokes of a heedless pen to deface, if not to demolish, the fair fabric of a lifelong work, to bruise the anxious heart of struggling but unknown merit, to do a cruel wrong by disparaging a work which he has barely examined, and which he has not troubled himself to understand. He has a giant's strength, not altogether by virtue of his own skill, but by virtue of the influence and circulation of the journal or review for which he writes. Woe be unto him if he uses it tyrannously! That it has been used tyrannously one need only turn to the back numbers of the older reviews to prove. "Cutting up" at one time almost became a profession. There were reviewers who vied with each other in the production of destructive criticism. So savage, and in many cases so untruthful,


were many of these reviews, that it came to be said of the writer of some of them, as a *jeu d'esprit*, that he was "always *lying* in a critical condition." These corrosive critics seemed to be—

"A spiteful race, on mischief bent,
Making men's woes their merriment."

Dr. Johnson has remarked that "the diversion of baiting an author has the sanction of all ages and nations, and it is more lawful than the sport of teasing other animals, because, for the most part, he comes voluntarily to the stake, furnished, as he imagines, by the patron powers of Literature with resistless weapons and impenetrable armour, with the mail of the boar of Erymanth, and the paws of the lion of Nemea." In one of the late Lord Lytton's tales, a critic in distress extenuates the severity of his literary judgments by saying that "the only thing the magazines will buy of him is *abuse*." Even in these more considerate days a slashing article sells. The public are not altogether averse to a little verjuice in the critic's ink. There are some readers who rather enjoy than otherwise the entertainment of seeing a poor devil of an author flayed alive. They know nothing, and care less, about his sufferings. They forget *that* life, as has been finely said, is a tragedy to

those who feel. "This is clever," they exclaim; but beyond the mildly exciting consciousness that somebody is on the rack, and that an extra twist or two is fine fun, they have no very clear perception of what that smart and pungent article means to a man whose all is staked upon the success or failure of his work. The critics are not invariably as charitable or as tender as they might be. When a clever epigram suggests itself, too cutting to be sacrificed, they do not always trouble much about the feelings of the subject of it. Literary vivisection is a pursuit, the fun of which lies very much in the grace and dexterity with which you handle the knife. If the victim howls, so much the better: it is a tribute to the effectiveness of your research.

There are occasions when this smartness and severity are not out of place; when, indeed, dull and pompous pretentiousness deserves to be buffeted and derided, and pricked in its wind-bag of self-esteem; when noodles require to be held up to ridicule, and pedants to be jeered out of their conceit. But some critics have indulged too generally and too indiscriminately in attacks of this sort. It is not only the noodles and the pedants whom they have lashed, but the painstaking and conscientious workers as well. Like



Iago, men of this kind are "nothing if not critical." To find fault is the great business of their vocation. As long ago as railing, rhyming Skelton's day, he had occasion to write:—

"The gyse now-a-days
Of some jangling jays
Is to discommend
That they cannot amend."

However worthy and laudable a work may be, they are sure to try and blight it with detraction, and with microscopic eye to seek some flaw or fault. The sun's spots are always of more account to them than the glory of his rays. All the world's swans are geese in their censorious eyes. Johnson is pompous and pedantic; Macaulay is showy and antithetical; Froude is spoilt by his love of paradox; Carlyle is harsh, discordant, volcanic, and mystical; Tennyson is too smooth and perfect; Thackeray is too cynical; Swinburne satiates with the sugary sweetness of his melodious verse; Dickens turns all nature into caricature; "George Eliot" is too full of scientific jargon and metaphysical disquisition; Ruskin raves; Lytton is fantastic and rhetorical; and all the less-known figures of Literature are swept aside with scornful and disparaging intolerance. However insignificant *the author's* faults may be in comparison with his

merits, the latter are, by these hypercritical personages, completely ignored. They see nothing *but* the faults. They are sent into the world to detect errors, to expose fallacies, to pull sophistries to pieces, to correct faults of taste, to complain, and grumble, and criticise, and condemn. A writer at whom the critics, with a unanimity which is wonderful, have agreed to laugh—the author of “Proverbial Philosophy”—has coined out of the name of Homer’s detractor a designation for this sort of criticism. He calls it “Zoilism,” and rails against it in good set terms. Zoilism is hypercriticism, either needless and gratuitous fault-finding, or fault-finding without any recognition of merits which conspicuously outweigh the sins. The story is *apropos* of the critic who wanted to show how superior his judgment was in respect of a certain picture. “Look at the colour, now—altogether overdone and unnatural; the drawing, how false and distorted! the chiaro-oscuro, how weak! And that fly, too,—no more like a real fly than I am!” Whereupon the fly, in magnificent scorn of the critic, flew away! In “Lalla Rookh,” the poet cleverly anticipates the fault-finders by introducing, at various breaks in the story, a certain learned chamberlain named Fadladeen,

whose erudition is exhibited only to be rebuked, and the triviality and captiousness of whose criticisms are a satire on the carping writers who never seek for anything but faults. "Fadladeen," we are told, "was a judge of everything—from the pencilling of a Circassian's eyebrows to the deepest question of Science and Literature; from the mixture of a conserve of rose-leaves to the composition of an epic poem." His censures were an infliction from which few recovered, and "his very praises were like the honey extracted from the bitter flowers of the aloe." The beauties of the poems which pleased Lalla Rookh melted away, in the acidity of his criticism, like pearls in the cup of the Egyptian queen. The tales of poor Feramorz were "frivolous," "inharmonious," "nonsensical;" the style was dull, the versification execrable; the subjects were badly chosen, and the narrator was always inspired by the worst parts of them: in short, poetry was by no means his proper vocation, and nothing but a total alteration of his style of writing and thinking would satisfy the exacting and atrabilious Fadladeen. Moore adds to the sly fun of his satire by making the chamberlain instantly recant all his criticisms when it transpires that Feramorz the poet, and the sovereign of

Bucharía are one. There have been a good many Fadladeens in the history of criticism, and possibly one or two "survivals" of the species may exist even in the present day. They are, or fancy themselves to be, such marvels of critical omniscience, that they are bound to censure. Nothing, however praiseworthy in purpose or skilful in execution, can satisfy judgments so severe and tastes so superlatively fastidious. What does Carlyle say? "We are firm believers in the maxim that, for all right judgment of any man or thing, it is useful, nay, essential, to see his good qualities before pronouncing on his bad. . . . At all events, it is a much shallower and more ignoble occupation to detect faults than to discover beauties. The Critic-fly, if it do but alight on any plinth or single cornice of a brave stately building, shall be able to declare, with its half-inch vision, that here is a speck and there an inequality; that, in fact, this and the other individual stone are nowise as they should be: for all this the Critic-fly will be sufficient; but to take in the fair relations of the whole—to see the building as one object, to estimate its purpose, the adjustment of its parts, and their harmonious co-operation towards that purpose, will require the eye and the mind of a Vitruvius or a Palladio."

A story is related of the great Michelangelo which illustrates this narrowness of critical vision and the affectation of taste with which it is sometimes accompanied. He submitted a piece of sculpture to a Cardinal who chose to regard himself as a connoisseur in matters appertaining to Art. "Humph!" said the critic, "yes, not bad,—really, not bad; but don't you think—you'll excuse my mentioning it—but don't you think the nose a little,—eh!—a *leetle* too long?" "Perhaps it is, your Eminence," replied the shrewd sculptor, full of a scheme of crafty pleasantry; "yes, now you remark it, I think it is." Whereupon he took up his chisel and a pinch or two of marble-dust, and pretended to make an alteration in the nose of the statue, dropping the dust as he did so to carry out the illusion. "There!" he said, "is that better?" "Ah! yes, that is a vast improvement," replied his Eminence; and he probably went on—though the story does not say so—to find other microscopic faults and make other critical suggestions. Dryden, in the preface to one of his plays, says, "I must take leave to tell the illiterate, censorious, and detracting people who set up for critics, that they wholly mistake the nature of criticism who think its business is principally to find fault. Criticism

as it was first instituted by Aristotle, was meant as a standard of judging well; the chiefest part of which is to observe those excellences which should delight a reasonable reader. It is malicious and unmanly to snarl at the little lapses of a pen, from which Virgil himself stands not exempted." And Byron puts a similar thought into verse when he says—

"Where frequent beauties strike the reader's view,
We must not quarrel for a blot or two ;
But pardon, equally to books or men,
The slips of human nature and the pen."

In an old number of "Notes and Queries" are printed the following lines, entitled "The Critic's Pruning-Knife," which have been hunted up by some industrious Dryasdust, and saved from utter oblivion. They indicate the abuses of criticism, and though personal in their application, are universal in their truth. It should be premised, for the clear understanding of the lines, that Edwards wrote a work entitled "Canons of Criticism," being a commentary on, and reply to, Warburton's edition of Shakespeare; that Hurd brought out an edition of Cowley; and that Mason edited Gray.

"When critic science first was known,
Somewhere upon the Muse's ground

The pruning-knife of wit was thrown.
Not that which Aristarchus found ;
That had a stout and longer blade :
'Twould at one blow cut off a limb.
This knife was delicately made,
Not to dismember, but to trim,
With a soft harmless edge at top ;
'Twas made like our prize-fighters' swords ;
Pages and chapters 'twould not lop,
But cut off syllables and words.
Well did it wear, and might have worn
Still many an age, and ne'er the worse,
Till Bentley's hand its edge did turn
On Milton's adamantine verse.
Warburton seized the blunted tool,
Fitter for oyster-opening drab ;
For critic use 'twas now too dull,
But though it would not cut, 'twould stab.
Then Shakespeare bled with every friend
That loved the bard : he threatened further ;
And God knows what had been the end,
Had not Tom Edwards cried out, ' Murther !'
Affrighted at the fearful word,
Awhile he hid the felon steel ;
Now shows it Mason, lends it Hurd,
And sees what Gray and Cowley feel."

One of the faults of critics, then, has been excessive fault-finding,—hypercritical captiousness,—a microscopic searching for defects ; and this characteristic has unquestionably wrought much mis-

chief. It has helped to bring criticism itself into evil odour and contempt. Its injustice is obvious: the effects of that injustice are far-reaching and continuous; and the bitterness of much of the criticism of the past has aggravated—which is a thing not altogether to be surprised at—the victims who have fallen beneath its lash. Half a century ago there was a race of reviewers who, like Mr. Rigby in “Coningsby,” were famous for the facility with which they could rattle off “slashing” articles, whether on politics or the *belles-lettres*. As we turn over the pages of the once powerful “quarterlies” and “monthlies,” and note the scornful humour, the bitter irony, the scathing invective with which literary judgments were then formulated, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the critic’s pen was too often dipped in wormwood. The object, in not a few instances, seems to have been to produce a smart article rather than to pass a fair judgment. Woe to the luckless wight whose work afforded the smallest pretence for savage treatment. They knew how to wield the tomahawk, did those reviewers of the last generation. They showed no mercy. They scalped their victims and held the reeking trophies aloft with savage glee. Some of them seem to have been


of the same opinion as Jerdan, who believed—although he did not put his creed into practice—that in the paths of Literature more is gained, and more immediately too, by making yourself feared rather than loved. A loving article, he says, makes no noise; an abusive philippic is talked about and heard of in all quarters, and curiosity does the rest. In Leigh Hunt's "Autobiography" occurs the following passage relating to the reckless ferocity which characterised reviewing in the early part of the century:—"Readers in these kindlier days of criticism have no conception of the extent to which personal hostility allowed itself to be transported in the periodicals of those times. Personal habits, appearances, connections, domesticities, nothing was safe from misrepresentations, begun, perhaps, in the gaiety of a saturnalian license, but gradually carried to an excess which would have been ludicrous had it not sometimes produced tragical consequences." Gifford's truculent pen was one of the busiest in this savage work. Croker, too, earned for himself an unenviable notoriety in the same line. It was the latter who wrote the virulent review of Russell's *Life of Moore* (his *friend*) which gave such distress to the poet's widow, and drew from the biographer a taunt

at the critic's "safe malignity." It was Croker who "cut up" Sir Robert Peel after spending some time at Drayton Manor as his guest. It was said of him—and the assertion was not without a basis of truth—that he would go a hundred miles through sleet and snow in a December night, to search a parish register for the sake of showing that a man was illegitimate, or a woman older than she said she was. The poet Rogers said a clever, cutting thing of him when he had written a malevolent notice of Macaulay's History,—“He has tried to commit murder, but has only succeeded in committing suicide.” Well, it was to such hands that the important work of giving critical judgment was not unfrequently entrusted in the old “slashing” days.

An American poet, J. T. Fields, wrote the following lines “to a malignant critic” of the type that is happily rare in these humaner days:—

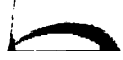
“Rail at him, brave spirit ! surround him with foes ;
The wolf's at his door, and there's none to defend ;
He's ' poor as a crow,' give him lustier blows,
And don't be alarmed, for he hasn't a friend.

“Now twirl your red steel in the wound you have made ;
His wife lies a-dying, his children are dead ;
He'll soon be alone, man, so don't be afraid,
But give him a thrust that will keep down his head.



"He has not a sixpence to buy his wife's shroud ;
He ' writes for a living,' so stab him again !
Raise a laugh as he timidly shrinks from the crowd,
And hunt him like bloodhound, most valiant of men."

There can be no question that both the "Edinburgh Review" and the "Quarterly," as well as "Blackwood" and "Fraser," and others of less note, have in their day rendered signal service to Literature. The "Edinburgh" especially became, in the hands of the talented young band who founded it, a great power, and on the whole used its power wisely and well. Jeffrey's criticism, as Carlyle says of it, was too often of the rash, reckless style. He criticised "everything in heaven and earth by appeal to *Molière's maid*: 'Do *you* like it?' 'Don't *you* like it?'—a style which, in hands more and more inferior to that stout-hearted old lady and him, has since grown gradually to such immeasurable length among us." Still he was an eminent critic in most departments of Literature, except poetry ; as regards that, he was woefully at fault,—wrapt up in the traditions of the past, and incapable of appreciating the new spirit that was to unfold Nature and make her many moods intelligible. Gifford's reign at the "Quarterly" was *far more* direful. He was not a critic, in the



true sense of the word, at all. He was a violent and bigoted partisan, and all his judgments were tinged with his fanatical prejudices in religion and politics.

But even in later years, when reviewing was confined within more legitimate bounds, it was too frequently characterised by animus and a fierceness of condemnation that in the present day would scarcely be tolerated. Mr. Robert Montgomery, the author of "Satan," may not have been a great poet,—he may not, indeed, have been a poet at all,—but a criminal of the deepest dye could scarcely have been held up to such obloquy as he was held up to in Macaulay's memorable review. James Smith said, "The pen is a weapon that may wound to distant ages; both policy and humanity require it to be wielded with caution." Yet how many men of rare attributes have been bruised in soul and broken in spirit by the rude bludgeon of some *soi-disant* critic, whose judgment,—harsh, unfeeling, inconsiderate,—magnified by the importance of the organ in which he wrote and whose influence gave weight to his words,—has gone on reverberating from one literary circle to another, until it has counterfeited the portentous rumble of Jove's

thunder, and utterly cowed and crushed its too sensitive victim.

Keats's untimely death is popularly associated with the undue severity of the criticism of which he was the victim. There is good reason to think that the seeds of the pulmonary complaint of which he died were sown long before he was subjected to these brutal attacks, and that, in any case, he was doomed to an early death. Byron's caustic parody—

“ Who killed John Keats ?
‘ I ’, said the *Quarterly*,
So savage and tartarly ;
‘ Twas one of my feats ; ’ ”

and his reference to the ill-starred young poet in “ Don Juan,” where he speaks of him as having been “ killed off by one critique,” and adds—

“ ’Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an article,”

still form the staple of uninformed belief respecting Keats. Lord Byron and Shelley certainly believed that Keats was killed by criticism. The former states in a manuscript note that Mr. Keats died at Rome of a decline produced by his having *burst a blood-vessel* on reading the article on his

"Endymion" in the "Quarterly Review." The review was enough to make any man indignant and angry, but the rupture and the decline would, no doubt, have come without it.

Keats had dedicated "Endymion" to Leigh Hunt, and this compliment to one, who was a *bête-noir* to the Toryism of that day, may have had something to do with the savage character of the critique in the "Quarterly," then under the editorial guidance of Gifford. A few extracts from so historical a review, which is said to have been written by Croker, will not be out of place:—

"Reviewers have been sometimes accused of not reading the works which they affected to criticise. On the present occasion we shall anticipate the author's complaint, and honestly confess that we have not read his work. Not that we have been wanting in our duty—far from it. Indeed, we have made efforts almost as superhuman as the story itself appears to be to get through it; but, with the fullest stretch of our perseverance, we are forced to confess that we have not been able to struggle beyond the first of the four books of which this Poetic Romance consists. We should extremely lament this want of energy, or whatever it may be, on our part, were it not for one consolation—namely, that we are no better acquainted with the meaning of the book through which we have so painfully toiled,

than we are with that of the three which we have not looked into.

"It is not that Mr. Keats (if that be his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody), it is not, we say, that the author has not powers of language, rays of fancy, and gleams of genius: he has all these; but he is unhappily a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry, which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language. Of this school Mr. Leigh Hunt aspires to be the hierophant.¹ . . . This author is a copyist of Mr. Hunt; but he is more unintelligible, almost as rugged, twice as diffuse, and ten times more tiresome and absurd than his prototype, who, though he imprudently presumed to seat himself in the chair of criticism, and to measure his own poetry by his own standard, yet generally had a meaning. But Mr. Keats has advanced no dogmas which he was bound to support by examples; his nonsense, therefore, is quite gratuitous; he writes it for its own sake; and, being bitten by Mr. Leigh Hunt's insane criticism, more than rivals the insanity of his poetry. . . . Of the story we have been able to make out but little: it seems to be mythological, and probably relates to the loves of Diana and Endymion; but of this, as the scope of the work has altogether escaped us, we cannot speak with any degree of certainty, and must therefore content ourselves with giving some instances of its diction and versification. And here again we are

perplexed and puzzled. At first it appeared to us that Mr. Keats had been amusing himself and wearying his readers with an immeasurable game at *bouts-rimés*; but, if we recollect rightly, it is an indispensable condition of this play that the rhymes, when filled up, shall have a meaning; and our author, as we have already hinted, has no meaning. He seems to us to write a line at random, and then he follows, not the thought excited by this line, but that suggested by the *rhyme* with which it concludes. There is hardly a complete couplet endorsing a complete idea in the book. He wanders from one subject to another, from the association, not of ideas, but of sounds, and the work is composed of hemistichs which, it is quite evident, have forced themselves upon the author by the mere force of the catchwords on which they turn.

"We come now to the author's taste in versification. He cannot indeed write a sentence, but perhaps he may be able to spin a line. The following are specimens of his prosodial notions of our English heroic metre:—

'Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
The passion poesy, glories infinite.'

'So plenteously all weed-hidden roots.'

'Of some strange history, potent to send.'

'Before the deep intoxication.'

'Her scarf into a fluttering pavilion.'

'The stubborn canvas for my voyage prepared,' &c.

"By this time our readers must be pretty well satisfied as to the meaning of his sentences and the structure of

his lines: we now present them with some of the new words with which, in imitation of Mr. Leigh Hunt, he adorns our language.

"We are told that 'turtles *passion* their voices;' that 'an harbour was *nested*;' and a lady's locks '*gordian'd* up;' and to supply the place of the nouns thus verbalised, Mr. Keats, with great fecundity, spawns new ones; such as 'men-slugs and human *serpentry*;' the '*honey-feel* of bliss;' 'wives prepare *needments*;' and so forth.

"Then he has formed new verbs by the process of cutting off their natural tails, the adverbs, and affixing them to their foreheads; thus 'the wine out-sparkled,' 'the multitude up-followed;' and 'night up-took;' 'the wind up-blows,' and 'the hours are down-sunken.'

"But if he sinks some adverbs in the verbs, he compensates the language with adverbs and adjectives, which he separates from the parent stock. Thus, a lady whispers '*pantingly* and close,' makes '*hushing* signs,' and steers her skiff into a '*ripply* cove;' a shower falls '*refreshfully*;' and a vulture has a '*spreaded tail*.' . . .

"If any one should be bold enough to purchase this Poetic Romance, and so much more patient than ourselves as to get beyond the first book, and so much more fortunate as to find a meaning, we entreat him to make us acquainted with his success; we shall then return to the task which we now abandon in despair, and endeavour to make all due amends to Mr. Keats and to our readers."

Now this was not criticism at all. It was simply snarling, unmitigated captiousness, and cold, rancorous raillery. Nobody can pretend—his greatest admirers have never pretended—that Keats's "Endymion" was faultless; but it had great and manifold beauties. The "Quarterly" reviewer either could not or would not appreciate these. He hunted diligently and malevolently for anything he could torture into a fault. He was clearly one of those miserable Aristarchs who are well described by Coleridge:—

"No private grudge they need, no personal spite :
The *viva sectio* is its own delight !
All enmity, all envy, they disclaim,
Disinterested thieves of our good name,
Cool, sober murderers of their neighbours' fame."

Nor was the brutality of the editor's nature much less than that of the critic's. Haydon says that after the first criticism in the "Quarterly," somebody from Dartmouth sent Keats £25. "I told Mrs. Hoppner this, and begged her to go to Gifford and endeavour to prevent his assault on 'Endymion.' She told me she found him writing with his green shade before his eyes, totally insensible to all reproach or entreaty. 'How

can you, Gifford, dish up in this dreadful manner a youth who has never offended you?' 'It has done him good,' replied Gifford; 'he has had £25 from Devonshire.'

The review of "Endymion" in "Blackwood" was even more scurrilous than the one in the "Quarterly." Keats was desired to "go back to his gallipots," and was told it was a wiser and better thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet. Keats was excessively sensitive, and his sensibilities were cruelly bruised by the ferocity of these judgments. Lord Houghton attempts to show, by a quotation from one of Keats's own letters, that he paid little heed to mere violence of language, even when proceeding from what were the accredited judgment-seats of those days. "Praise or blame," says the poet in this letter, "has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what 'Blackwood' or the 'Quarterly' could possibly inflict." The abuse of the reviewers might not have killed John Keats, but so fine a sense of his own shortcomings was by no means incompatible *with an acute sensitiveness to the attacks of others.*

Leigh Hunt has shown conclusively that Keats felt and suffered, and that the wrong rankled in his mind. If the savage critiques did nothing more, they deterred him from completing "Hyperion,"—that fragment which Lord Byron declared seemed as if it were "actually inspired by the Titans," and to be "as sublime as *Æschylus*,"—and thereby cheated the world of the best fruits of his ripening intellect.

Shelley nobly avenged his friend in "Adonais." "It may well be said," he remarks in the preface, "that these wretched men (the critics) know not what they do. They scatter their insults and their slanders without heed as to whether the poisoned shaft lights on a heart made callous by many blows, or one, like Keats's, composed of more penetrable stuff;" and in the poem itself he thus flings his bitter scorn at the chief offender :—

"Our Adonais has drunk poison—oh !

What deaf and viperous murderer could crown

Life's early cup with such a draught of woe ?

The nameless worm would now itself disown :

It felt, yet could escape the magic tone

Whose prelude held all envy, hate, and wrong,

But what was howling in one breast alone,

Silent with expectation of the song,

Whose master's hand is cold, whose silver lyre unstrung.

“Live thou, whose infamy is not thy fame !
Live ! fear no heavier chastisement from me,
Thou noteless blot on a remembered name !
But be thyself, and know thyself to be !
And ever in thy season be thou free
To spill the venom when thy fangs o’erflow :
Remorse and Self-contempt still cling to thee ;
Hot Shame shall burn upon thy secret brow,
And like a beaten hound tremble thou shalt—as now.”

To discover and foster immature genius, not to crush it with wanton jests and ribald sneers, is the critic’s true function and one of his noblest tasks. It was happily said of William Jerdan, the famous editor of the “Literary Gazette,” that “with opportunities of being smart and caustic, of inflicting hurt and injury, to show his wit or gratify his spleen, he has taken the other course, that of aiding the efforts of early genius, of encouraging the hopes of neglected talent, of cheering the path of authors anxiously struggling on through the difficulties of their way.” That, perhaps, is the noblest fame the critic can earn. In the days when Gifford and Croker were powers, the reverse was too often the practice, and neither taste nor feeling was considered in the compilation of a slashing review. Bentley, when threatened once by a critic, said that “no man was ever written down but by

himself." The dictum is open to question. If the merciless judge has power to kill the body, surely it is not beyond belief that he may have sometimes stifled the reputation. Who knows what potentialities of genius may have remained unperfected through the cruel discouragement of adverse criticism? Who knows what careers of promise have been abruptly cut short by the indiscriminating censure of an unqualified reviewer? Isaac Disraeli says, "that undue severity of criticism which diminishes the number of good authors is a greater calamity than even that mawkish panegyric which may invite indifferent ones." It has been equally well said by another writer, that a worthless book produces no great evil in Literature; it dies soon and naturally; but that unjust harshness of judgment, which lessens by one page the contributions of genius to the cause of human improvement, is a serious and great calamity. Racine acknowledged that one of the severe criticisms he had received occasioned him more vexation than the greatest applauses had afforded him pleasure. The story of Tasso is a melancholy illustration of the disastrous effects of harsh and captious judgments. When he had finished his great epic, instead of trusting to the

opinion of the public, he sent it in the first instance to a society of critics and scholars in Rome. These gentlemen were delighted with the opportunity of vindicating their existence, and they found so much fault, and made such waspish comments, that poor Tasso was driven temporarily insane. He tried by altering his work to please his exacting critics, but his reason was overpowered by the mortification he endured, and the rest of his ruined life was spent in alternations of wildly ambitious hopes and morbid despair. It is generally believed that Hawkesworth's end was accelerated by the chagrin which he felt at the severe criticisms passed upon the unnecessary warmth of descriptions of his foreign customs.

Some further instances of the effects of severe criticism are given in the "Curiosities of Literature." "Sir John Marsham having published the first part of his 'Chronology,' suffered so much chagrin at the endless controversies which it raised, that he burnt the second part, which was ready for the press. Pope was observed to writhe with anguish in his chair on hearing mentioned the letter of Cibber, with other temporary attacks ; and it is said of Montesquieu, that he was so much

affected by the criticisms, true and false, which he daily experienced, that they contributed to hasten his death. Ritson's extreme irritability closed in lunacy, while the ignorant reviewers, in the shape of assassins, were haunting his death-bed. Scott of Amwell never recovered from a ludicrous criticism written by a physician who never pretended to poetical taste. To these instances we may add the fate of the Abbé Cassagne, a man of learning and not destitute of talents. He was intended for one of the preachers at court; but he had hardly made himself known in the pulpit when he was struck by the lightning of Boileau's muse. He felt so acutely the caustic verses, that they rendered him almost incapable of literary labour; in the prime of life he became melancholy, and shortly afterwards became insane. A modern painter, it is known, never recovered from the biting ridicule of a popular but malignant wit. Cummys, a celebrated Quaker, confessed he died of an anonymous letter in a public paper, which, said he, 'fastened on my heart, and threw me into this slow fever.' The feathered arrow of an epigram has sometimes been wet with the heart's blood of its victim. Fortune has been lost, reputation destroyed, and every charity of

life extinguished by the inhumanity of inconsiderate wit."

Shelley was driven into exile by the savage chorus of calumnious critics. His life was embittered to no slight extent by the malignancy and brutality of unsympathetic reviewers. The "Quarterly Review" wielded its poleaxe over his head as it did over the heads of other bright spirits whom the truculent Gifford and his crew of butchers were unable to comprehend. Mr. J. A. Symonds shows us, in his delightful sketch of Shelley, what an effect this treatment had in checking his enthusiasm for composition. "My faculties are shaken to atoms and torpid," he says in a letter to Leigh Hunt. "I can write nothing." And again, "It is impossible to compose except under the strong excitement of an assurance of finding sympathy in what you write." Not only was Shelley's life made unhappy, but his productiveness as a poet was impaired by the relentless ferocity with which every new effort was attacked.

It is extremely probable that those same gentlemen who so flippantly assail an author's productions, and hold them up to ridicule or scorn, would be the first to wince if they were


submitted to similar treatment themselves. "We do not find, moreover," says the author of "Friends in Council," "that severe critics, when their turn comes to have their shadow set dancing on the white sheet in the lecture-room, have attained that extreme indifference to concentrated solar light and scientific comment, which should make them unable to imagine what are the sensations of other men when exhibited to the staring public in this remorseless fashion."


There is a season for everything, and there is a season for stern, relentless criticism. Remembering the large power and ever-growing influence of criticism, it must be recognised that the grave responsibility rests on those who help to form it of directing it, not only for the intellectual information, but also for the moral guidance, of the multitude whom they profess to lead. If critics are faithless to the principles of good taste and public decency,—if the sentinels of Literature and the Drama fall asleep at their posts,—if those who profess to steer, guide us on to the rocks of a licentious fiction or the quicksands of an impure stage,—a solemn, it may even be said an awful, responsibility rests at their doors. The immoral and the false, the vicious and the degrading,

deserve the critic's castigation, and it should be applied with all the fearless freedom consistent with dignity, honesty, and self-control. The law of libel, which curbs the license and personalism of the press, throws no ægis around those who degrade literature with the poison of insidious vice. The critic is free to lay upon them the lash of his indignation without hindrance. Nay, more, it is his duty to do so; and if he evades that duty or flinches from it, or temporises with the evil, or glosses it over with seeming toleration, he betrays a great and serious trust, and becomes an accessory in a mischief of the direst kind. The late Lord Chief-Justice Cockburn once said from the judgment-seat, that "those who, in their capacity as literary critics, are, so to speak, prosecutors on behalf of the public, should be allowed to bring to the bar of public opinion those who are guilty of delinquencies against good taste, against morality, or against religion;" and if their case be a just one, and their judgment equitable and honest, they are warranted in using the strongest language of warning and the most withering words of rebuke.

CHAPTER IV.

TURNING THE TABLES ON THE CRITICS.

 HE critics have not always been suffered to have it all their own way. Frequently, not only have their judgments been challenged, but they themselves have been punished, in one way or another, by the vengeful author. It is not every one who dies of chagrin or shrinks back into obscurity when the critic has dealt with him unsparingly. Nowadays, an unjust criticism, if it is worth taking any notice of at all, is generally referred to the arbitrament of the law-courts,—at all events, in England.* In France, where folly still coquettes with murder in the duello, the aggrieved party appeals to the small sword, and tries to “wash his spear” in the blood of his critic. In the less civilised parts of America, a critic who ventured to be very severe would stand a good chance of being “cowhided,”



nor would the fact that his criticism was animated by a *bonâ fide* spirit at all moderate the severity of his punishment. In former days, Englishmen have resented savage critiques both with the pistol and the horsewhip. As an illustration of the latter mode of revenge may be recalled the memorable *ésclandre* connected with the Hon. Grantley Berkeley and "Fraser's Magazine." The whole story is told in the full report of the trial which appeared in the magazine for January 1837, but a brief *résumé* cannot fail to be interesting in this place. In August 1836 a very severe review of Mr. Berkeley's novel "Berkeley Castle" was published in "Fraser." It was written by Dr. William Maginn. The book was unquestionably open to censure; the author devoted an unnecessary degree of exaltation to his own ancestors; the narrative dealt a good deal in intrigue; and some of the episodes were indelicate, if not licentious. Dr. Maginn fell upon it tooth and nail; he was a Tory, and Mr. Berkeley was a Whig; and in those days political animosities were carried to a scandalous length. It is not unlikely that the feelings of the partisan gave a personal bias to the critique, and helped to *embitter its tone*; at the same time there was

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room for a fair amount of animadversion. But "Fraser" wielded a bludgeon in those days.

The passionate reviewer surcharged his article with gross and inexcusable personalities. He travelled far beyond the legitimate bounds of criticism, and raked up private matters in connection with Mr. Berkeley's parentage which ought not to have been referred to, and which could only have been referred to with the malignant motive of inflicting pain. The novel was held up to the severest condemnation on the score of being contaminated with "looseness and dirt," and it was said that the author had insulted the lady to whom he inscribed his book by dedicating such "bestialities" to her. Contemptuous and insulting phrases, and imputations of cowardice, untruthfulness, and vulgarity were liberally distributed through the pages of this truculent article, the unmitigated violence of which afforded a clear proof of the reviewer's animus. "Berkeley Castle" was a vain, pretentious, and not too moral production, and its faults of taste furnished a fit and tempting theme for the critic's rebuke. But there was no justification for pelting the author with mud out of the gutter, for scolding him with the reckless slanders of a literary Billingsgate, or for

punishing his errors by raking up painful family episodes which took place before he was born. The coarseness and personality of this sort of invective would be held inexcusable nowadays, however stupid or pernicious might be the book under review. Mr. Berkeley seems to have been thoroughly enraged with the treatment he received ; he armed himself with a heavy horse-whip, went in company with Mr. Craven Berkeley and a hired man to Mr. Fraser's shop, and inflicted upon the unfortunate publisher a violent, and indeed, a savage castigation. An action was brought by Mr. Fraser in the Exchequer Court to recover compensation for this assault. For the defence, it was not denied that an assault had been committed, but it was urged that the provocation Mr. Berkeley had received extenuated his conduct, and ought to be considered in mitigation of damages. Passages from the review were read by Mr. Thesiger, his counsel, and commented on with great power. Then Mr. Erle, who was for the plaintiff, justified the severity of the criticism, declaring that an author's work was public property ; that if it violated propriety it deserved rough treatment ; *that Mr. Berkeley had no business to parade his*

ancestors in the way he had done ; that some of the scenes in his book warranted the description of "bestialities ;" and that it was fair to assume that he sympathised with the character of the seducer whom he made his hero. The jury returned a verdict against the defendant, with £100 damages, and a cross-action which he brought against Mr. Fraser for libel was settled by a verdict of forty shillings, each party paying his own costs. The matter did not end here. A duel was fought between Mr. Berkeley and Dr. Maginn, and after three shots had been exchanged without effect, the honour of the parties was considered satisfied. The critic subsequently wrote a justificatory article in the pages of the magazine, in which, while admitting that some of the language was open to a meaning which he had not intended to convey, he maintained that the criticism on the whole was fair ; declared that he had no intention of apologising for it ; and animadverted in strong terms on the peculiar method of retaliation which the honourable author had thought fit to adopt. Looking back now upon this incident, which stirred society to its profoundest depths nearly half a century ago, the impartial chronicler is obliged to declare, that though the book deserved a severe

"dressing," Maginn's criticism was grossly offensive and libellous, and Berkeley's retaliation cowardly and illegal. Literature and the law were open to him if he felt that he was entitled to redress; he might have answered his assailant in print or proceeded against him in the courts. Even if the horsewhip had been his only, or the most suitable weapon, he might at least have had the discrimination to horsewhip the right man.

Dr. Wolcot ("Peter Pindar") once got himself into a sorry plight through his rashness in castigating the wrong man for an adverse criticism. "Wolcot," says Jerdan in his "Autobiography," "mistook Mr. William for Mr. John Gifford, who had criticised him severely in the 'Anti-Jacobin Review' (William was editor of the witty 'Anti-Jacobin' newspaper), and assaulted him furiously in Mr. Wright's shop. The party assailed, however, snatched the cane out of the assailant's hands and belaboured him with it till he was pushed out of doors—a punishment not a hundredth part so painful and ill to endure as was the withering 'Epistle to Peter Pindar' which endorsed the castigation." A mock-heroic poem on the subject of this encounter was brought out

under the title of "The Battle of the Bards," a few lines of which may be worth quoting :—


"'Is Gifford here?' the maniac minstrel cried.
Gifford, 'Lo ! him thou seek'st is here !' replied.
'From hence then take thy ferry o'er to hell !'
Right on his sconce the sturdy sapling fell.
His sconce, impenetrable, scorned a wound,
But hollow rung, and gave a mournful sound,
While horror bristled up his wond'ring hair,
And strained each muscle to an iron stare.
Stupid awhile he stood, and eyed the foe
With frozen glare, a monument of woe ;
Till, blown by gusts of rage, his ebbing blood
Foaming came back, spring-tide, a roaring flood !
And now his shoulders to the work he lays,
And now the blow at cent. per cent. repays ;
Dire blow ! that threatened ruin to his brain,
And all its embryo brood, a harmless train ;
For there, unfledged, the young ideas rest,
Like callow birdlings in a cuckoo's nest."

The ludicrous side of the retaliatory passion is supplied in the rencontre between Moore and Jeffrey. When the former brought out his "Odes and Epistles," Jeffrey attacked them without mercy in the "Edinburgh Review." This roused Moore's Irish blood, and a challenge was the result. The challenge was accepted, the time agreed to, the seconds appointed, and the place

—Chalk Farm—decided upon. Moore has left a narrative of the silly affair which is not at all deficient in an appreciation of the humorous aspect of the episode and its laughable termination. On the ground, the principals were left together for a few minutes. Jeffrey said, "What a beautiful morning it is!" "Yes," answered Moore, "a morning made for better purposes;" to which Jeffrey gave an assenting sigh. "As our assistants," Moore relates, "were not, any more than ourselves, very expert at warlike matters, they were rather slow in their proceedings; and as Jeffrey and I walked up and down together, we came once in sight of their operations: upon which I related to him, as rather *apropos* to the purpose, what Billy Egan, the Irish barrister, once said, when, as he was sauntering about in like manner while the pistols were loading, his antagonist, a fiery little fellow, called out to him angrily to keep the ground. 'Don't make yourself unaisy, my dear fellow,' said Egan; 'sure isn't it bad enough to take the dose without being by at the mixing up?'" In such jocular converse did these two men of letters, who were bent on a murderous business, in form if not in reality, while away the time devoted to

arranging the preliminaries. As soon, however, as they were placed, and were waiting the signal to fire, some police-officers rushed out from behind a hedge, took the combatants into custody, and conveyed them to Bow Street. They had to send out for bail, and while the messengers were absent, all the parties concerned sat down harmoniously together and entered upon the discussion of some literary topic, just as if the event of the morning had had no existence. There was, at first, a slight suspicion of foul play, one of the police-officers having declared that Moore's pistol contained a bullet and that Jeffrey's did not; but the matter was satisfactorily cleared up. It was to this that Byron referred when he blunderingly wrote about "Little's leadless pistol." Of course, when the story of the bloodless encounter got wind, both parties were abundantly quizzed, and the periodicals of the day contained numerous satirical allusions and *jeux d'esprit* on the subject. Not long after, Moore and Jeffrey met at the house of a mutual friend. Jeffrey admitted the exceptionable nature of portions of his review, a reconciliation was effected, and the two became fast friends from that date. X

In the majority of instances, the aggrieved



victims of criticism who have thought it worth their while to retaliate, have done so with the same weapon as their assailants, — namely, the pen. One of the most noteworthy illustrations of this game of tit for tat is furnished in the case of Lord Byron. Every one is, of course, familiar with the savage treatment which the youthful lord's juvenile poems, called "Hours of Idleness," received at the hands of the "Edinburgh Review." The article, which was written by Brougham, though it was undoubtedly severe, and very erroneous in its estimate of the young poet's powers, can hardly be said to have exceeded the limits of legitimate criticism. It cannot be uninteresting to quote some of the passages of so memorable and eventful a production :—

"The poesy of this young lord belongs to the class which neither gods nor men are said to permit. Indeed, we do not recollect to have seen a quantity of verse with so few deviations in either direction from that exact standard. His effusions are spread over a dead flat, and can no more get above or below the level than if they were so much stagnant water. As an extenuation of this offence, the noble author is peculiarly forward in pleading minority. We have it in the title-page and on the very back of the volume ; it follows

his name like a favourite part of his *style*. . . . Now, the law upon the point of minority we hold to be perfectly clear. It is a plea available only to the defendant ; no plaintiff can offer it as a supplementary ground of action. Thus, if any suit could be brought against Lord Byron for the purpose of compelling him to put into court a certain quantity of poetry, and if judgment were given against him, it is highly probable that an exception would be taken were he to deliver *for poetry* the contents of this volume. To this he might plead *minority* ; but, as he now makes voluntary tender of the article, he has no right to sue on that ground for the price in good current praise should the goods be unmarketable. This is our view of the law on the point, and we dare say so it will be ruled. Perhaps, however, in reality, all that he tells us about his youth is rather with a view to increase our wonder than to soften our censures. He possibly means to say, ‘ See how a minor can write ! This poem was actually composed by a young man of eighteen, and this by one of only sixteen ! ’ But, alas ! we all remember the poetry of Cowley at ten and Pope at twelve ; and so far from hearing, with any degree of surprise, that very poor verses were written by a youth from his leaving school to his leaving college inclusive, we really believe this to be the most common of all occurrences ; that it happens in the life of nine men in ten who are educated in England ; and that the tenth man writes better verse than Lord Byron.

“His other plea of privilege our author rather brings forward in order to waive it. He certainly, however, does allude frequently to his family and ancestors—sometimes in poetry, sometimes in notes; and, while giving up his claim on the score of rank, he takes care to remember us of Dr. Johnson’s saying, that when a nobleman appears as an author, his merit should be handsomely acknowledged. In truth, it is this consideration only that induces us to give Lord Byron’s poems a place in our ‘Review,’ beside our desire to counsel him that he do forthwith abandon poetry, and turn his talents, which are great, to better account.

“With this view, we must beg leave seriously to assure him that the mere rhyming of the final syllable, even when accompanied by the presence of a certain number of feet,—nay, although (which does not always happen) those feet should scan regularly, and have been all counted accurately upon the fingers,—is not the whole art of poetry. We would entreat him to believe that a certain portion of liveliness, somewhat of fancy, is necessary to constitute a poem, and that a poem, in the present day, to be read, must contain at least one thought, either in a little degree different from the ideas of former writers, or differently expressed.”

The reviewer, after caustically referring to several of the poems in detail, concludes as follows :—


“Whatever judgment may be passed on the poems of this noble minor, it seems we must take them as we find

them and be content, for they are the last we shall ever have from him. He is, at best, he says, but an intruder into the groves of Parnassus : he never lived in a garret, like the thorough-bred poets ; and ‘ though he once roved a careless mountaineer in the Highlands of Scotland,’ he has not of late enjoyed this advantage. Moreover, he expects no profit from his publication ; and, whether it succeeds or not, ‘ it is highly improbable, from his situations and pursuits hereafter,’ that he should again condescend to become an author. Therefore, let us take what we get and be thankful. What right have we poor devils to be nice ? We are well off to have got so much from a man of this Lord’s station, who does not live in a garret, but ‘ has the sway ’ of Newstead Abbey. Again we say, let us be thankful ; and, with honest Sancho, bid God bless the giver, nor look the gift-horse in the mouth.”

This criticism, as Sir Egerton Brydges observes, “ touched Lord Byron in the point where his original strength lay ; it wounded his pride and roused his bitter indignation.” Forthwith he set to work and produced the famous satire on “ English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,” in which he poured forth his bitter anger in an indiscriminating but powerful torrent of scorn. The satire was one of which his maturer judgment disapproved, but it at least had the advantage of showing of what stuff the young poet was made, and gave

evidence that his capacity and strength had been utterly miscalculated by Brougham. "I well recollect," said Byron twelve years later, "the effect which the critique of the 'Edinburgh Reviewers' on my first poem had on me : it was rage, and resistance, and redress, but not despondency nor despair. A savage review is hemlock to a sucking author, and the one on me knocked me down ; but I got up again. That critique was a masterpiece of low wit, a tissue of scurrilous abuse. . . . But so far from their bullying me or deterring me from writing, I was bent on falsifying their raven predictions, and determined to show them, croak as they would, that it was not the last time they should hear from me." Jeffrey, being the editor of the "Edinburgh," naturally came in for a share of the young satirist's wrath :—

"Health to immortal Jeffrey ! once, in name,
England could boast a judge almost the same ;
In soul so like, so merciful, yet just,
Some think that Satan has resigned his trust,
And given the spirit to the world again,
To sentence letters, as he sentenced men.
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Can none remember that eventful day,
That ever glorious, almost fatal fray,



When Little's* leadless pistol met his eye,
 And Bow Street myrmidons stood laughing by?
 Oh, day disastrous ! on her firm-set rock
 Dunedin's castle felt a secret shock ;

.
 The Tolbooth felt—for marble sometimes can,
 On such occasions, feel as much as man—
 The Tolbooth felt defrauded of his charms
 If Jeffrey died except within her arms.

.
 But Caledonia's goddess hovered o'er
 The field, and saved him from the wrath of Moore ;
 From either pistol snatched the vengeful lead,
 And straight restored it to her favourite's head ;
 That head, with greater than magnetic power,
 Caught it, as Danaë caught the golden show'r,
 And, though the thickening dross will scarce refine,
 Augments its ore, and is itself a mine."

Byron had the candour to admit subsequently
 that much of this was "ferocious" and "too per-
 sonal." Towards the end of the satire he thus
 breaks out in a passage which shows how deeply
 his feelings were wounded :—

"The time hath been when no harsh sound would fall
 From lips that now may seem imbued with gall,
 Nor fools nor follies tempt me to despise
 The meanest thing that crawled beneath my eyes :
 But now, so callous grown, so changed since youth,
 I've learned to think, and sternly speak the truth ;

* Moore.

Learned to deride the critic's starch decree,
And break him on the wheel he meant for me." .

With regard to the biting references to Jeffrey, the "Eclectic Review" charitably suggested that there was sufficient provocation in the satire to urge "a man of honour" to defy his assailant to mortal combat. Byron alludes to this in the "Hints from Horace," a sort of sequel to the "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers:"—


" Arise, my Jeffrey ! or my inkless pen
Shall never blunt its edge on meaner men ;
Till thee or thine mine evil eye discerns,
Alas ! I cannot 'strike at wretched kernes.'
Dear, d——d contemner of my schoolboy songs,
Hast thou no vengeance for my manhood's wrongs ?
If unprovoked thou once could bid me bleed,
Hast thou no weapon for my daring deed ?
What ! not a word ?—and am I then so low ?
Wilt thou forbear, who never spared a foe ?
Hast thou no wrath, or wish to give it vent ?
No wit for nobles, dunces by descent ?
No jest on 'minors,' quibbles on a name,
Nor one facetious paragraph of blame ? "

Jeffrey had the good sense to disregard these taunts. Moore, however, needed no inducement to pick up the gauntlet. Byron's allusions so provoked him that he sent a challenge to the noble

author of the satire. By a happy chance, however, the missive did not reach Byron until some months later, and by that time feeling on both sides had sufficiently cooled down to permit of a *rapprochement*, which ripened presently into friendship. The little Irishman was very blustering and bellicose when he considered that he had been affronted, but he bore no ill-will, and forgave his critics and his satirists, readily took the proffered hand of reconciliation, and became the ally and intimate of those against whom he had been erstwhile full of vengeance and fury. Jeffrey, in later criticisms on Lord Byron's poetry, had the fairness and the manliness to recognise its promise and its worth. Not every editor would have acted thus after being made the target of such bitter and vituperative attacks. As Byron himself admits, "None but a great soul dared hazard it : a little scribbler would have gone on cavilling to the end of the chapter." A strange contrast was, indeed, furnished by the "Edinburgh," in its post-mortem eulogies on Byron, to that mordant review of the "Hours of Idleness." It was only sixteen years later, but the tale was a very different one. "Greece, Italy, the world," it said, "have lost their poet-hero, and his death has spread a wider gloom and

been recorded with a deeper awe than has waited on the obsequies of any of the many great who have departed in our remembrance. Even detraction has been silent at his tomb, and the more generous of his enemies have fallen into the rank of his mourners. But he set like the sun in his glory, and his orb was greatest and brightest at the last."

Another projected literary duel that came to nothing may be narrated here. Lord Byron was so enraged at a criticism by William Jerdan of his lines on Mrs. Charlemont (Lady Byron's attendant)—unworthy though those lines were, and generally though they were condemned—that he deemed it right to demand satisfaction. He intrusted the challenge to Mr. Douglas Kinnaird, who, however, had the good sense to keep it in his pocket, and professed that he could not find the culprit during the whole day. In the evening he expostulated with his lordship, and put it to him whether it was "not beneath his dignity to call out a paltry scribbler, who might even, by some awkward chance, shoot him, and rob the peerage and the poetic world of one of their greatest ornaments." This was not the only *occasion* upon which Mr. Kinnaird exercised a



wise discretion. When Southey dubbed Byron "the Coryphæus of the Satanic School," and held up him and his school "to public detestation," his lordship committed a cartel of mortal defiance to Mr. Kinnaird's hands, but the warlike missive was judiciously put aside, and was never heard of by Mr. Southey until after the death of its author.

The publication of "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" was not Lord Byron's only retort upon his critics. He replied at some length to at least two of the criticisms on "Don Juan,"—namely, that in the "British Review" and that in "Blackwood." The poem contained a facetious allusion which the editor of the former of these critical journals chose to take *au sérieux*. It ran as follows:—

"For fear some prudish readers should grow skittish,
I've bribed my grandmother's review—the 'British.'
I sent it in a letter to the editor,
Who thanked me duly by return of post—
I'm for a handsome article his creditor;
Yet, if my gentle Muse he please to roast,
And break a promise, after having made it her,
Denying the receipt of what it cost,
And smear his page with gall instead of honey,
All I can say is—that he had the money."

The editor waxed very wroth at the liberty thus taken, and denounced the statement as a "calumnious falsehood," of which no peer of the British realm could surely have been guilty; and called upon Lord Byron to disclaim a work imputed to him, "containing a calumny so wholly the product of malignant invention." His lordship replied in a pseudonymous "Letter to the Editor of 'My Grandmother's Review,'" in which he jocularly bantered his critic, declared that Lord Byron could not have written the offensive passage because he had not a grandmother, hinted that his lordship was not in the habit of paying his reviewers in money, but rather *in their own coin*, with a good many other quizzical arguments, which showed that the poet was ready and cunning of fence, and a master of the art of polite irony.

The reply to "Blackwood" was a much longer affair and in a more serious vein. The Northern magazine in its review of "Don Juan" was terribly severe. "It appears," said the critic, "as if this miserable man, having exhausted every species of sensual gratification—having drained the cup of sin even to its bitterest dregs—were resolved to show us that he is no longer a human

being, even in his frailties, but a cool, unconcerned fiend, laughing with a detestable glee over the whole of the better and worse elements of which human life is composed—treating with well-nigh equal derision the most pure of virtues and the most odious of vices—dead alike to the beauty of the one and the deformity of the other—a mere heartless despiser of that frail but noble humanity whose type was never exhibited in a shape of more deplorable degradation than in his own contemptuously distinct delineation of himself.” The writer goes on to charge the poet with “commencing a filthy and impious poem with an elaborate satire on the character and manners of his wife,” with forcing the iron of his contempt into her very soul, with deserting her, and with turning back and wounding her widowed privacy with unhallowed strains of cold-blooded mockery. All this, it was said, was “brutally, fiendishly inexpressibly mean.” Byron’s reply was suppressed during his lifetime, but was published after his death. It is chiefly remarkable for the strength of the writer’s animosity against Southey, and for the vigour with which he condemns the school of the Lakers, and upholds Pope and Dryden as the best examples of true poetry and classic taste.

He devotes, too, a great deal of skill to a defence, half-jocular and half-serious, of his personal conduct. The war between him and Southey grew to a white heat afterwards, and there was truly no love lost between Byron and the author of "A Vision of Judgment."

The annals of criticism contain scores of instances of literary retaliation. Pope wrote the "Dunciad" to deride the wretched detractors and spiteful cavillers of Grub Street. Colley Cibber's good-tempered letter to him is a happy illustration of the criticised getting the best of the critic. So effective was its quiet, self-restrained tone, that Pope writhed in his chair whenever it was mentioned. Dryden's scathing attacks on his critics, particularly Settle and Shadwell, are familiar to every student of literature. The satire on Shadwell in "MacFlecknoe" is a masterpiece of scalding scorn. Shadwell invited the punishment by a scurrilous attack upon Dryden, full of the grossest personalities. His own work is forgotten; that which it evoked in retort lives. Churchill's "Apology" was occasioned by a severe critique on the "Rosciad" which had appeared in the pages of the "Critical Review." Leigh Hunt attacked the literary terrorism of Gifford in

"Ultra-Crepidarius." Gifford himself, ready as he was to assail others with venomous party criticism, was more than once goaded into retort by the severity with which he was treated. His translation of Juvenal was very roughly handled in the "Critical Review." The article was characterised by ignorance, vulgarity, and abusive personality, but it was only a degree or two worse than some of Gifford's own coarse and virulent judgments. Stung by the censure of his critic, he made haste to vindicate his scholarship and his taste in a bitterly vituperative pamphlet. "I love criticism," he says, "and have studied it; and I honour critics,—genuine ones, I mean: sacred be their strictures! But when they descend from their station, revile instead of examine, and, in the attitude of a drunken porter, thrust their fists into our faces, they lose their privilege, and become just objects of attack in their turn. In this degraded situation stand the 'Critical Reviewers.' I sought no quarrel with them; but since they neglect their office to become pugilists—pugilists too of the most despicable order, fretful, irritating, and litigious—I am content to defend myself." The pamphlet, and a supplement which was subsequently added to it, are admirable examples of

the savage literary warfare which prevailed in those days. This is the scornful way in which he winds up his answer to the "Review's" rejoinder. "During my apprenticeship . . . I took every opportunity of watching the actions of insects and reptiles, and, among the rest, of a huge toad. I never loved toads, but I never molested them. This toad, then, who had taken up his residence under a hollow stone in a hedge of blind nettles, I used to watch for hours together. It was a lazy, lumpish animal, that squatted on its belly, and peaked up its hideous head with two glazed eyes, precisely like a 'Critical Reviewer.' In this posture, perfectly satisfied with itself, it would remain as if it were part of the stone that sheltered it, till the cheerful buzzing of some winged insect provoked it to give signs of life. The dead glare of its eyes then brightened into a vivid lustre, and it awkwardly shuffled to the entrance of its cell, and opened its detestable mouth to snap the passing fly or honey-bee. Since I have marked the manners of the 'Critical Reviewers,' these passages of my youth have often occurred to me."

Mr. Algernon Swinburne retorted on one of his critics in a scathing pamphlet, entitled "Under the Microscope." Tennyson's first volume of

poems was reviewed by "Christopher North" in "Blackwood" in terms partly of commendation and partly of blame. In the second volume, the poet retaliates in these curious verses, which have long since disappeared from the editions of his collected works :—

TO CHRISTOPHER NORTH.

"You did late review my lays,
 Crusty Christopher ;
 You did mingle blame and praise,
 Rusty Christopher.
 When I learnt from whom it came,
 I forgave you all the blame,
 Musty Christopher ;
 I could *not* forgive the praise,
 Fusty Christopher."

There is, however, a notable instance of retort worth more particular notice. When Thackeray published his Christmas tale, "The Kickleburys on the Rhine," it was subjected to an offensive criticism in the "Times" newspaper. The style of the notice was inflated, the language was pompous and oracular, and the taste was—well, questionable. It was said that "the popular author finds it convenient," at the Christmas season, "to fill up the declared deficit, and

place himself in a position the more effectually to encounter those liabilities which sternly assert themselves contemporaneously, and in contrast with the careless and free-handed tendencies of the season, by the emission of Christmas books—a kind of literary *assignats*, representing to the emitter expunged debts, to the receiver an investment of enigmatical value. For the most part bearing the stamp of their origin in the vacuity of the writer's exchequer rather than in the fulness of his genius, they suggest by their feeble flavour the rinsings of a void brain after the more important concoctions of the expired year." And so on, with much more in the same strain. To the second edition of the tale Thackeray prefixed, by way of preface, "An Essay on Thunder and Small Beer," a delightful bit of caustic humour. He bantered "Jupiter Jeames" on his style, on his "hoighth of foine language entoi rely!" and on his pompous Latinity, comparing him with a Holywell Street buck, who puts on every pinchbeck ring, pin, and chain he possesses to go and cut a dash in the Park. It was not Jove himself who had written the review, but the Thunderer's man, said Thackeray. "Why twit me *with my poverty*?" he asked; "and what can the

'Times' critic know about the vacuity of my exchequer? Did he ever lend me any money? Did he not himself write for money? If he finds no disgrace in being paid, why should I? If he has ever been poor, why should he joke at my empty exchequer? . . . Let us have truth before all. I would rather have a good word than a bad one from any person; but if a critic abuses me from a high place, and it is worth my while, I will appeal. If I can show that the judge who is delivering sentence against me, and laying down the law and making a pretence of learning, has no learning and no law, and is neither more nor less than a pompous noodle, who ought not to be heard in any respectable court, I will do so." Poor "Jupiter Jeames!" his was a sorry plight by the time the satirist had done with him. The flagellation was provoked; it was good-temperedly given, but it was terribly effective. All England laughed at the luckless wight, but he was comparatively safe in his anonymity, though the *cognoscenti* shrugged their shoulders and whispered the name of Samuel Phillips.

CHAPTER V.

CRITICISM IN RELATION TO THE LAW.

BESORT has not infrequently been had to the law by those who have considered themselves unfairly dealt with by the critics. There is, however, one disadvantage about legal retaliation which does not apply to literary retaliation, and that is, it is uncertain. What the subject of an adverse criticism may regard as unfair and libellous does not always appear so to a jury. From the summaries of a few interesting trials which are appended it will be seen that an appeal to the law does not invariably result in a turning of the tables on the critic. The law of criticism is now tolerably clear. Ridicule and condemnation are allowable if they are *bond fide* and confined strictly to the *work* criticised, without any personal animus or

a reckless exhibition of smart writing. The keynote of the existing law, as regards the use of ridicule in criticism, was sounded by Lord Ellenborough when he was Lord Chief-Justice, and the passage in which he deals with this point is worth noting. A certain Sir John Carr wrote a foolish book of travels called "A Tour in Scotland," which was held up to ridicule in a publication of the time, against the publishers of which he brought an action for the recovery of damages. In giving judgment, Lord Ellenborough said, "One writer, in exposing the absurdities and errors of another, may make use of ridicule, however poignant. Ridicule is often the fittest instrument which can be employed for such a purpose. If the reputation or pecuniary interests of the party ridiculed suffer, it is *damnum absque injuria*. Perhaps the plaintiff's 'Tour in Scotland' is now unsaleable; but is he to be indemnified by receiving a compensation in damages from the person who may have opened the eyes of the public to the bad taste and inanity of his composition? Who prized the works of Sir Robert Filmer after he had been refuted by Mr. Locke? But shall it be said that he might have maintained an action for defamation

against the great philosopher, who was labouring to enlighten and ameliorate mankind? We really must not cramp observations upon authors and their works. Every man who publishes a book commits himself to the judgment of the public, and any one may comment upon his performance. He may not only be refuted, but turned into ridicule, if his blunders are ridiculous. Reflection on personal character is another thing. Show me any attack upon the plaintiff's character, unconnected with his authorship, and I shall be as ready to protect him; but I cannot hear of malice from merely laughing at his works. The works may be very valuable for anything I know to the contrary, but others have a right to pass judgment upon them. The critic does a great service to society who exposes vapid as well as mischievous publications. He checks the dissemination of bad taste, and saves his fellow-subjects from wasting their time and their money upon trash. If a loss arises to the author, it is a loss without injury; it is a loss which the party ought to sustain; it is the loss of fame and profit to which he never was entitled. Nothing can be conceived more threatening to the liberty of the *press* than the species of action before the court.


We ought to resist an attempt against fair and free criticism at the threshold."

In the following cases other points of law will appear, and where the judge's remarks seem to be worthy of preservation, as enlightening critics and authors with regard to the legal limits of criticism, they will be briefly epitomised.

In 1867 was tried in the Court of Queen's Bench the action of *Strauss v. "The Athenæum."* The plaintiff had written a novel entitled "The Old Ledger," which the critic of the "Athenæum" described as being characterised by "vulgarity, profanity, and indelicacy, bad French, bad German, and bad English, and abuse of persons, living and dead." An action for libel was brought at the Kingston Assizes; but after the reading of several extracts from the book, Mr. Serjeant Ballantine, the plaintiff's own counsel, consented to the withdrawal of a juror, each party paying his own costs. The "Athenæum" of 7th April 1866 contained an article written by Mr. Hepworth Dixon, its editor, justifying the original criticism, and explaining the reason why the defendant had consented to a termination of the trial without a verdict. "We found the book," it was said, "abominable, and we said so. . . . We cannot

sully our pages with extracts from the book," &c. For this second article Strauss brought a new action in the Court of Queen's Bench. The novel was again largely quoted from, the passages abundantly justifying, in the opinion of the Lord Chief-Justice, the remarks of the critic. Mr. Dixon was examined, and described the book as "most abominable." It is a little curious that Mr. Dixon was himself, later on, the plaintiff in an action for an alleged libel in a criticism imputing that his own works were impure. The jury in the "Athenæum" case found for the defendant after hearing an elaborate explanation of the law from Sir Alexander Cockburn, which has an important bearing upon the rights and limits of criticism. "That the original criticism was severe," said his Lordship, "there could not be a doubt; but the question was whether, severe as it was, it was not warranted by the nature of the work. It was of the last importance in Literature, and, through Literature, to good taste and good feeling, to morality and religion, that works published for general perusal should be such as were calculated to improve, and not to demoralise, the public mind; and therefore it was of vast importance that criticism, so long as it was fair and reasonable

and just, should be allowed the utmost latitude, and that the most unsparing censure of works which were fairly subject to it should not be held libellous. A man who published a book challenged criticism; he rejoiced in it if it tended to praise and if it was likely to increase the circulation of his work, and therefore he must submit to it if it was adverse, so long as it was not prompted by malice or characterised by a reckless disregard of fairness towards the author." His Lordship having referred to the passages in the book upon which the defendant relied to justify the criticism, went on to say, "It is not because the ultimate aim or moral of the book may be good that, if it is nevertheless replete with passages of an offensive and obnoxious character, therefore a critic may not with fairness describe it with the severity which those passages deserve." And again he remarked, "The critic who sits in judgment on the works of others is, no doubt, bound to be impartial; and even although you should be of opinion that the work did not wholly deserve the description given of it, still that is not the question. The question is whether, as a whole, it was fair, or prompted by motives of another character."



In the year 1871 Mr. George Augustus Sala, the accomplished *littérateur*, was subjected to what was undoubtedly a libellous attack of an utterly unjustifiable character. The late Mr. Hain Friswell wrote a series of sketches entitled "Modern Men of Letters Honestly Criticised," which was published by Messrs. Hodder & Stoughton, and which contained an article of the most personal kind on Mr. Sala. No good purpose would be served by recalling the offensive insinuations against private character which were submitted to the jury. It is enough that they imputed looseness of life and a disregard of religion, and that the jury returned a verdict for the plaintiff with £500 damages.

Mr. Hepworth Dixon, as already alluded to, brought an action in 1872 against the "Pall Mall Gazette" for speaking of his books as obscene and inaccurate, and calling him "a successful compiler of obscene literature and vamped-up travels." The "Pall Mall" boldly asserted justification, and Mr. Dixon was submitted to a searching cross-examination with reference to his works on "New America," "Spiritual Wives," "Free Russia," &c. Extracts were read from these, and especially from the second, which dealt

with the theory of "complex marriages," the tenets of the Shakers, and the teachings of Ebel, Noyes, and Sach. An account of the plaintiff's visit to the Agapemone and his description of Sister Zoe were also brought before the court in support of the plea of justification. Mr. Dixon's contention was that these revelations of a very unpalatable phase of life were made in "a philosophical spirit" and as part of "a systematic inquiry." The defendants denied this, and charged against the works that they were dressed up with a flashy fascination for the purpose of gratifying prurient tastes, and that the profligate communities with which they dealt were elevated into a fictitious importance. Sir John Karslake, in a powerful speech, read numerous passages from "Spiritual Wives," which the newspapers of the day declined to reproduce, and he concluded by saying, "As you say you are a member of a high and honourable guild or calling, I say you have prostituted that calling; that you have palmed off as being works of philosophy things which you knew were works of filth. You have injured that high calling to which you belong, and you are a writer of obscene and vamped-up books." The trial ended in a verdict

for the plaintiff with damages one farthing—one of those victories which are hardly distinguishable from defeats.

On February 10, 1873, Mr. Charles Reade, the well-known novelist and playwright, sued the "Morning Advertiser," for damages arising out of an alleged libel. Mr. Reade had dramatised, under the name of "Shilly-Shally," Mr. Anthony Trollope's story of "Ralph the Heir," and the play was produced at the Gaiety Theatre. In criticising the piece, the "Advertiser" said, "In the matter of the taste exhibited in the writing of 'Shilly-Shally,' it is as well that intending playgoers—men who propose to take their young sisters, daughters, or sweethearts to the theatre—should know what modest women needs must hear in sitting through the piece." Having given extracts from the dialogue, the critic went on to remark, "There were many horselaughs at these specimens of comedy dialogue, but, we shame to say, not one hiss from the crowded auditory was heard for the coarseness. Either the vulgarity and fleshly coarseness of modern burlesque has thoroughly debauched the public taste, or decent people—as we should hope and believe—have not individually the moral courage to hiss down

the wretched *doubles entendres* which disgusted them." Mr. Reade brought an action for this plain speaking, and stated in the witness-box that he attributed this and other adverse notices to a conspiracy on the part of rival dramatists who were also critics,—in fact, to a sort of trade confederacy originating in envy and malice. It was admitted that the "Times" and the "Daily Telegraph" had condemned the play, and that the former had pronounced "at least three of its passages indecent ;" but Mr. Reade accounted for this by saying that Mr. Oxenford, the regular critic, was away, and his work was entrusted to some "little scrub." The plaintiff repudiated any impropriety in his play, and said, "We authors are surprised by blackguards in the gallery putting an indecent meaning, and a blackguard in a newspaper is much like a blackguard in the gallery." Mr. Lee, the writer of the critique, declared upon his oath that he had no instructions what view he was to take ; that he had no malice against Mr. Reade ; and that he expressed his honest conviction. He utterly repudiated any combination with his brother critics, and declared that he wrote the notice without communication with any of them. Nevertheless, the

jury punished the candour of the condemnation by mulcting the proprietors of the "Advertiser" in £200 damages.

In somewhat curious contrast to this case was an action brought in the same year by Mr. W. S. Gilbert, the dramatic author, against the "Pall Mall Gazette" for a criticism of his fairy comedy "The Wicked World," then playing at the Haymarket Theatre. The critic spoke of the "vulgarity" and "coarseness" of the play, referred to parts of it as "showing a strong smack of Oneida Creek" (then known through its connection with the Free Lovers), and said one scene was "simply indecent." Mr. Gilbert attributed the tone of the article to private malice, and endeavoured to support this view by references to former criticisms of his plays in the same journal. Mr. Oxenford, Mr. Buckstone, Mr. Blanchard, and Mr. Wills gave evidence that they saw nothing in the play to suggest or necessitate indecency in the acting. The defence was that the critic had merely discharged a public duty to the best of his opinion; that there was no malice; and, in short, amounted to a plea of justification. The jury came to the opinion that both the play and the article were innocent, and found for the defendant; that

is, they held, the critic justified in expressing his honest opinion, though they did not think the play itself was offensive to public decorum. In summing up the case to the jury, Mr. Justice Brett gave a lucid exposition of the law as regards criticism, which it may be worth while to quote. "The alleged libel being," he said, "an alleged libellous criticism on a public work, first, do you think that the effect of the article complained of is that it is a fair criticism of, and comment upon, the plaintiff's play? It is so, however hostile in spirit, and however, in your opinion, wrong as a criticism, if it does not travel out of the work for the purpose of slander, if it treats only of the work as a work, and of the mode and manner in which the author has, as an artist, executed that work. In such a case it is not a libel. Or, secondly, do you think that the effect of the article complained of is, that it travels out of and beyond the work, and the mode or manner in which the author, as an artist, executed his work; is more than adverse criticism of the work; and imputes to the author personally, either as an author or otherwise, either in the execution of the criticised work or otherwise, some conduct or motive which, if truly imputed, would, in the

eyes of reasonable persons of right sentiments, cause a feeling of hatred, ridicule, or contempt for him? If this be the effect, it is a libel. In such a case, it is immaterial that it was written *bonâ fide*, with a good motive, and with the belief that it was true. If words and expressions are used in the criticism which would be defamatory of the author personally if applied to him personally, and if the work which is criticised gives no fair and reasonable ground for the application of such words or expressions, such fact is evidence on which you may hold that such words and expressions do travel beyond the author's work and apply to him personally."

Another notable squabble between literary men resulted in an action for libel brought by Robert Buchanan against the proprietor of the "Examiner." There had been a good deal of critical sharp-shooting going on for some years. In 1871 Mr. Buchanan communicated to the "Contemporary Review" an article, signed "Thomas Maitland," on "The Fleshly School of Poetry," in which he took occasion to pass some pungent criticisms upon the poems of Swinburne, Rossetti, and Morris. The real authorship of the essay was avowed shortly afterwards, and Mr. Swin-

burne replied to his assailant in a caustic article entitled "Under the Microscope." Both in his "Session of the Poets" and his "White Rose and Red," references the reverse of complimentary to what he had christened the "Fleshly School" were made by Mr. Buchanan. In one place Mr. Swinburne was described as "jumping up with his neck stretched out like a gander," and in another Mr. Tennyson was made to say of him, "'To the door with the boy: call a cab; he is tipsy;' and they carried the naughty young gentleman out." The feud had not died out when an anonymous work (subsequently acknowledged to be the production of the Earl of Southesk), bearing the title of "Jonas Fisher," entertained the literary quidnuncs with a further attack on the "Fleshly School." A review of it appeared in the "Examiner," in the course of which it was said to be the opinion of "the London correspondents" that it was either the work of Robert Buchanan or the Devil, and the preference was given to the former, inasmuch as it was considered unlikely that the Devil would have any motive for abusing the "Fleshly School." Mr. Buchanan promptly disclaimed the authorship of "Jonas Fisher," but a week or so later there appeared in the "Exa-

miner" a letter headed "The Devil's Due," and signed "Thomas Maitland." Among other things, the writer of this letter, who by and by appeared to be no other than Mr. Swinburne himself, said that "an author haunted by such a horror of the bloodthirsty critics who lie in wait for him, has evidently yet to learn the new and precious receipt discovered by Mr. Robert Buchanan (if that be his name) of 'Every Poeticule his own Criticaster,' a device by which Bavius may at once review his own poems with enthusiasm under the signature of Mævius, and throw dirt up in passing, with momentary security, at the wisdom of Horace or of Virgil." Mr. Buchanan was also spoken of in this letter (which formed the main ground of the action for libel) as "the multifaced idyllist of the gutter," "a polypseudonymous lyrist and libeller;" and, with reference to his absence in Scotland, "a skulk" and "Captain Shuffleton." It was pleaded that these amenities were fair comment; that Buchanan had begun the attack, and merited some punishment in return; and that the severity of the condemnation dealt out to him was justified by the fact that he had written in terms of eulogium of Walt Whitman, whom he described as "a great ideal prophet" and a



philosophical inquirer into truth. A good portion of the inquiry was taken up with extracts of a gross character from Whitman's works, and Mr. Buchanan was asked to explain the seeming inconsistency of exalting the American writer while bestowing unsparing condemnation on the "Fleshly School." In summing up, the learned judge made some dignified remarks on the perilous tendency of this "School," and in the end the jury found for the plaintiff, assessing damages at £150.

An action was brought at Edinburgh in 1875 by Mr. A. Keith Johnston against the "Athenæum," for a damaging criticism on an atlas produced by the firm of W. & A. K. Johnston, of which he was the sole surviving partner. The criticism intimated that the work, although bearing the name of A. Keith Johnston, was not the production of either the *primus* or *secundus* of that name, "for the son is no longer connected with the house established by his late father." It went on to complain of the absence of true geographical acumen, and said that the atlas, although nicely got up, was "scarcely a work likely to maintain the special character of the firm under whose name it appears, it being one that might have been prepared at the worktable of any mapmaker of

ordinary ability." "Indistinctness" and "overcrowding of names" were complained of, and the critic said, "On the whole, we miss in this atlas the presence of the master-mind which, in both father and son, gave to the house of W. & A. K. Johnston the character it has so long enjoyed, but, we fear, is now losing in the world of science." It was proved that the pursuer had been for many years a partner in the firm, and that the same assistants were employed as had been before the retirement of Sir William Johnston, the senior partner. The review complained of had been written by Dr. Beke, who was well acquainted with geographical works, and some evidence was called for the defence to show that the atlas was not free from errors. The jury found that the "Athenæum" had "falsely and calumniously represented that the pursuer and his said firm had falsely, and for the purpose of deceiving the public, issued as the work of A. Keith Johnston an atlas which was not the work of either A. Keith Johnston the first or A. Keith Johnston the second, but of persons not skilled in making an atlas;" and they awarded damages in compensation for the injury done to the amount of £1275.

In the latter part of the same year, Mr. Irving, the eminent actor, was compelled to take proceedings against the comic journal "Fun"—in the first place against the printers, but subsequently against the editor and one of his staff—for an article which can scarcely be included among the examples of criticism, so brutal and outrageous were its terms. The article took the form of "A Letter to a Fashionable Tragedian," but there could be no possible doubt who it referred to. "With the hireling portion of the press at your command," said this scurrilous attack, "you have induced the vulgar and unthinking to consider you a model of histrionic ability, and the pioneer of an intellectual and cultured school of dramatic art. Having thus focussed the attention of the mob, you have not hesitated nightly to debauch its intelligence, to steep it in an atmosphere of diabolical lust and crude carnage, to cast around the foulest outrages the glamour of a false sentimentality. You have idealised blank-verse butchery, until murder and assassination have come to be considered the natural environments of the noble and heroic. Already the deadly weeds, whose seeds you have so persistently scattered, are spreading in rank

luxuriance over the whole surface of society. Men revel in the details of the lowest forms of human violence; women crowd the public courts to gloat over the filthy details of murder and license; children in their nurses' arms babble the names of miscreants who have in sober earnest performed the deeds which you so successfully mimic for a weekly consideration. I maintain that for the disgusting bloodthirstiness and callous immorality of the present day you are in a great measure responsible. You have pandered to the lowest passions of our nature by clothing in an attractive garb the vilest actions of which we are capable. As a burgomaster, a schoolmaster, a king, a brother, a prince, and a chieftain, all of murderous proclivities, you have deluged the modern stage with the sanguine fluid and strewn it with corpses. . . . You have canonised the cut-throat, you have anointed the assassin. Be content with the ghastly train of butchers you have foisted upon public attention, and let your next venture, at least, be innocent of slaughter. If your performance of Othello be trumpeted to the four winds of heaven by the gang of time-serving reporters in your employ, you will increase the epidemic of wife-murder one hundred-fold, and degrade the national

drama a further degree towards the level of 'The Penny Dreadful.' I am, your obedient servant, A Disinterested Observer."

When the defendants appeared at Guildhall, whither Mr. Irving summoned them to answer a charge of publishing a "scandalous and defamatory libel," they made a humble and complete apology, which, as Mr. Irving's character had been satisfactorily vindicated by the proceedings, was accepted, and the matter there ended. Mr. Irving was loudly cheered on his arrival at and departure from the court, the public exhibiting in the most marked way their sympathy with him under the outrageous and altogether unwarrantable attack. The writer of this rude, railing criticism, was a young and inexperienced journalist. He has since made some mark in the lighter walks of literature, and probably no one regrets so much as himself the misadventurous dash into which he was betrayed by the temptation to indulge in denunciation of the tremendous type.

Artistic circles were much interested, towards the close of the year 1878, in a civil action brought by Mr. Whistler against the eminent art-critic Mr. Ruskin. Mr. Whistler had exhibited some of his productions, which he called "Nocturnes"

and "Arrangements," at the Grosvenor Gallery, and their slightness of workmanship and want of anything like finish exasperated Mr. Ruskin into a very trenchant attack, on the new school in general and Mr. Whistler in particular, in the pages of "Fors Clavigera." The passage which Mr. Whistler deemed to be libellous and exceeding the limits of fair criticism was as follows :— " For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen and heard much of Cockney impudence before now, but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." The high authority of the writer gave to this severe condemnation a special importance, and very likely the sale of Mr. Whistler's "Nocturnes" and "Arrangements" was interfered with in consequence. Mr. Ruskin's defence was that the words were a fair and *bonâ fide* criticism upon pictures exhibited to the public view. A good deal of the evidence turned upon the technical merits of Mr. Whistler's work, and eminent experts were called


on both sides to give their opinion. The plaintiff explained what he meant to convey, and admitted that he often "knocked off" these pictures, for which he asked two hundred guineas, in a couple of days. Mr. Rossetti said he appreciated the meaning of the works, and thought some of them very artistic, and the productions of a conscientious artist. Mr. Albert Moore claimed for them that they possessed originality and were not put at too high a price. On the other hand, Mr. Burne Jones, Mr. Frith, R.A., and Mr. Tom Taylor spoke slightly of Mr. Whistler's work. The first-named said that complete finish was the standard of painting; that these works were simply beginnings; and that the artist had evaded the difficulties of painting by not carrying his pictures far enough. Both Mr. Frith and Mr. Taylor spoke of them as clever arrangements in colour, but little more than a step in advance of delicately toned wall-papers. Mr. Ruskin's own theory, as set forth by his counsel, was that no piece of work should leave the artist's hands which by study or patience can be improved. His criticism was honest and sincere; and in using the term "coxcomb," he applied it to Mr. Whistler as an artist, not as a man. In summing up, Baron Huddleston said it was "of

the last importance that a critic should have full latitude to express the judgments he honestly formed, and for that purpose there was no reason why he should not use ridicule as a weapon; but a critic must confine himself to criticism, and not make it the veil for personal censure, nor allow himself to run into reckless and unfair attacks merely from the love of exercising his power of denunciation." The jury appear to have thought that the criticism amounted, technically, to a libel, but that Mr. Ruskin was as nearly justified as possible in expressing himself as he did. At any rate, that is the only construction of which a verdict for the plaintiff with a farthing damages seems to be capable.

Mr. Whistler followed up the matter in an amusing pamphlet on "Art and Art Critics," to which reference has been made in a previous chapter, and in which, in his own peculiarly trenchant style, he argued that art-critics ought to have no existence at all.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CAUSES OF BAD CRITICISM.

T is impossible to deny that bad criticism exists—that it is sometimes shallow, occasionally prejudiced, often hasty and ill-considered. Our literary and art-judges are not always competent men, or honest men, or even painstaking men. Ignorance, carelessness, and sometimes malice, are to be met with in the judgments which they throw off with flippancy ease. While the great majority of professional critics are conscientious men, well informed on the subjects of which they treat, and animated by an honest desire to do justice, there is a small minority who not only bring discredit upon their calling, but by their faulty decisions mislead the public, and applaud what ought to be ridiculed, or censure that which is worthy of praise. Even conscientious criticism is not always accurate. A man may be very anxious to do what is right

and yet unable to approach the question from the proper point of view. Pope assigns to pride, meaning thereby intellectual conceit or the dogmatism of strong prejudice, the chief place in conspiring to blind man's erring judgment. Anything like arrogance of opinion is fatal to sound criticism. A critic of very determined views brings everything to the test of those views. He is incapable of receiving any impressions which do not tally with his own preconceived ideas. He obstinately refuses to look at anything except from his own point of view. He may be thoroughly honest, yet so immovably prejudiced that his judgment is of no earthly value. "I have sometimes thought," says Hazlitt, "that the most acute and original-minded men make bad critics. They look at everything too much through a particular medium. What does not fall in with their own bias and mode of composition strikes them as commonplace and factitious. What does not come into the direct line of their vision, they regard idly, with vacant, 'lack-lustre eye.' The extreme force of their original impressions, compared with the feebleness of those they receive at second-hand from others, oversets the balance and just proportion of their minds." The critic who reters

every production of taste and intellect to the standards of his own prejudice might just as well try and reduce the writings of a Shakespeare or the pictures of a Turner to the mere expression of a mathematical formula. No critic can be truly appreciative or just who does not understand and sympathise with the motive of the author or artist upon whose work he is sitting in judgment. To attempt to form a correct estimate when he is debarred by the conditions of his mind from looking fairly at the work, at its meaning, its purpose, and its execution, is to try and weigh Art in a hand-balance, and measure Genius with a two-foot rule. The infinite varieties of human power ought not to be stretched out or cramped to fit the Procrustean exactions of one man's domineering intelligence. Goethe says, "You have only to apply a different standard from that of the author, and he is *sure* to have failed;" and Carlyle, who saw as deeply into these things as most men, declared it a fact that we have not *read* an author—and therefore cannot have understood him—till we have seen his object, whatever it may be, as *he* saw it. The first consideration with the critic, and one which, unfortunately, is not always observed, should be to arrive at the aim of a

worker, and to put himself in harmony with the initial idea of the work. It is not only that the mathematician should not undertake to judge of efforts of pure imagination, or the critic of strongly poetic sympathies attempt to review a new edition of the Newtonian philosophy—extravagances of that kind are not very likely to happen—but that the critic should not proceed to form a judgment at all until he has grasped the intention, the *motif*, the spirit of the work he has to criticise. The seeming unintelligibility of Blake's strange productions, the unhidden coarseness of Walt Whitman's verse, and the artistic effrontery of Whistler's "colour symphonies" may be deserving of condemnation, or at the best of modified praise, when they are understood ; but any criticism of them is shallow and idle and impertinent which does not take into account their drift and purpose, and what it is they are intended to do and to convey.

Then there are the rule-of-thumb critics. Everything must fall in with the regulations of accepted custom. They have a certain experience of the ordinary, and it is by the dull level of the ordinary that they measure everything submitted to their notice. Never once are their souls carried into the regions of enthusiasm, or their pulses stirred

by the audacity of the unconventional. Sterne has satirised the class in that inimitable dialogue between the censor and his friend :—

“And what of this new book the whole world makes such a rout about?”

“Oh, ’tis out of all plumb, my lord; quite an irregular thing! Not one of the angles at the four corners is a right angle. I had my rule and compasses in my pocket.”

“Excellent critic!”

“And for the epic poem your Lordship bade me look at, upon taking the length, breadth, height, and depth of it, and trying them at home upon an exact scale of Bossu’s, ’tis out, my Lord, in every one of its dimensions.”

“Admirable connoisseur!”

Again: “How did Garrick speak the soliloquy last night?”

“Oh, against all rule, my Lord, most ungrammatically. Betwixt the substantive and the adjective, which should agree together in number, case, and gender, he made a breach thus —, stopping as if the point wanted settling; and betwixt the nominative case, which, your Lordship knows, should govern the verb, he suspended his voice in the epilogue a dozen times, three seconds

H



and three-fifths by a stop-watch, my Lord, each time."

"But, in suspending his voice, was the sense suspended also? Did no expression of attitude or countenance fill up the chasm? Did you narrowly look?"

"I looked only at the stop-watch, my Lord."

"Excellent observer!"


Ignorance is a fruitful cause of bad criticism. A person is occasionally allowed to wield the critic's pen who has not only had no special training for the task, but who is deficient in natural taste and acquired qualifications. Yet, without the least hesitation, he undertakes the responsible duty—

"Assumes the rod, affects the god,
And seems to shake the spheres."

The heroine of Mr. Black's "Macleod of Dare"—an actress—says, "I find that the usual way in the provincial towns is to let the young literary aspirant, or the clever compositor who has been promoted to the sub-editor's room, try his hand first of all at reviewing books, and then to turn him on to dramatic and musical criticism." Pos-



sibly this may be a current belief among actresses, but so far as, at any rate, the big provincial towns are concerned, it is altogether erroneous. The newspapers of those towns employ gentlemen to do their dramatic and literary notices who possess special fitness for the work, and a novice would no more be allowed, as a general rule, to try his prentice-hand at the one or the other than at the leading article. Now and then, and especially in small towns, where the newspaper reporter is a sort of Jack-of-all-trades, and has to report speeches, write summaries, condense news, and throw in a sub-leader, a couple of reviews, and a theatrical notice as his week's work, an incompetent hand may be entrusted with the responsible duty of giving utterance to what is supposed by the readers of the paper to be a critical opinion. It is related that there appeared, not so very long ago, in a provincial journal, a notice of a performance of "Romeo and Juliet," in which the play was treated as a first production, and Mr. William Shakespeare as a new, and, on the whole, rather promising author. This is, of course, an exceptional case, but those who are at all familiar with the business of criticism know that persons of no experience in dramatic matters are sometimes




deputed to criticise the actors,—who have to get their living by their art, and to whom judicious praise often means bread,—and that other persons are occasionally allowed to review books on subjects of which till that moment they were absolutely in a state of ignorance. Praise and censure, in such a case, are alike worthless; but the public who read the jauntily written article, confident and unhesitating in its tone, know nothing of the imposture practised upon them, and innocently conclude that this authoritative distribution of praise or blame can only proceed from an oracle who knows what he is talking about. Joubert declares that “ignorance, which in matters of morals extenuates the crime, is itself, in intellectual matters, a crime of the first order.” What would be thought of the appointment of a criminal judge who knew nothing of the law? Would it not be denounced, and very properly denounced, as an infamous scandal? Yet men, and even boys, have ere now been allowed to occupy the critic’s chair, to exalt mediocrity and to abuse talent, who were just as incapable of arriving at a sound conclusion as a judge would be who knew nothing about law.

“The Ass was so intoxicated
And shallow pated,

That ever since
He's got a fancy in his skull
That he's a commission from his Prince
(Dated when the moon's at full)
To summon every soul,
Every Ass, and Ass's foal,
To try the quick and dull ;
Trumpeting through the fields and streets,
Stopping and judging all he meets ;
Pronouncing with the air
Of one pronouncing from the chair,~
'That's a beauty'—'This is new'—
'That's passing false'—'That there is true'—
Just like the '—— Review' !”


Carelessness, too, is a fault into which critics sometimes fall. They skim a book, dip into its pages here and there, bestow a little attention on the preface, read over the index, and then submit it to the critical process. Sydney Smith once remarked in jocular irony that no reviewer ought to read the book he reviews, because it was calculated to prejudice his judgment. That is an injunction which is, now and then, taken a little too literally by some of the indolent gentlemen who are attached to the minor journals. It is not altogether outside the limits of human experience to have seen a critique of a play which, by some sudden change of plan, was not presented at all,



and the only possible inference is that the careless critic never went to the theatre, but relied upon his "inner consciousness" for the material of his impartial report. Some very curious stories might be told of clairvoyant criticism. Lord Campbell, when he was dramatic critic for the "Morning Chronicle," was very nearly falling into a pitfall of this kind on one occasion. He tells the story in his "Autobiography." "On one occasion, when 'Romeo and Juliet' was acted at Covent Garden, I was obliged to stay and draw a long and difficult plea, which must be on the file the next morning to prevent judgment being signed. For the first and only time in my life I wrote a conjectural criticism, without having witnessed the performance; and I commented upon the monument scene as it is in Shakespeare, where Romeo dies from the poison before Juliet awakes from the trance. Having handed this to the printer, I proceeded for a little relaxation to the Cider Cellar in Maiden Lane. There, to my horror and consternation, I heard from a person who had been present that this scene was to-night represented according to the alteration by Cibber, who makes Juliet to awake while Romeo is still alive but after he has swallowed the poison, which

in his ecstasy at her revival he forgets till he feels its pangs. I ran to the 'Morning Chronicle' office, altered my criticism, and introduced a compliment to the spirited and tender manner in which Romeo exclaimed, 'She lives she moves, and we shall still be happy.' Except on this occasion, when I had taken care to say nothing that could injure any one, I can truly declare that my criticisms, whether well or ill founded, were the result of my own observation and expressed my genuine opinion."

A want of conscientious care, even in less flagrant and accusable forms, is not only unfair to the subject of it, but misleading to public opinion, and therefore injurious to public taste. It is not possible in all cases to find out that the book has been reviewed without having been read, or the play criticised without having been seen, and we take it for granted that our taster has done his tasting carefully, and honestly, and fairly. All writers are not so delightfully candid as one in the "Indo-European Correspondence," who recently said:—"Our opinion of Carlyle, whose works we have never read, is that he was a much over-rated man; Ruskin, whose works we have likewise never read, is by far his superior." One of the




very few instances in which the reviewer was justified in writing his critique after simply reading the titlepage of the book was that in which some author—(if the story is not true it is *ben trovato*)—great at fighting with shadows, wrote a pamphlet entitled, "Shakespeare not an Impostor." The critic, without troubling himself to read the arguments adduced, laconically wrote, "Who said he was?"

Lack of special knowledge is sometimes concealed by a little adroit cramming, and the critic brings in a lot of references and authorities, so glibly and skilfully, that he appears quite a master of his subject to the bamboozled readers of the review. This is want of conscientiousness in another form. It is not practised to any great extent now, since all the best periodicals employ specialists, or at least writers of experience. But it seems to have been largely in vogue in Thackeray's day, if the career of Pendennis is to be taken as a faithful transcript of life. "The courage of young critics," he says, "is prodigious: they clamber up to the judgment-seat, and, with scarce a hesitation, give their opinion upon works the most intricate or profound. Had Macaulay's '*History*' or Herschel's '*Astronomy*' been put

before Pen at this period, he would have looked through the volumes, meditated his opinion over a cigar, and signified his august approval of either author, as if the critic had been their born superior and indulgent master and patron. By the help of the 'Biographie Universelle' or the British Museum, he would be able to take a rapid *résumé* of an historical period, and allude to names, dates, and facts in such a masterly, easy way as to astonish his mamma at home, who wondered where the boy could have acquired such a prodigious store of reading, and himself too, when he came to read over his articles two or three months after they had been composed, and when he had forgotten the subject and the books which he had consulted. At that period of his life, Mr. Pen owns that he would not have hesitated, at twenty-four hours' notice, to pass an opinion upon the greatest scholars, or to give a judgment upon the 'Encyclopædia.'"


This readiness to jump into the judgment-seat has been at all times a characteristic of young critics. It is such an easy matter to formulate opinion and to dash off decisions. One of the causes of bad criticism is this inexperience, which leads to flippancy and superficiality. As a rule,

the younger the critic, the more stringent are his verdicts, and the greater the asperity with which he expresses them. The smartness of his article is often a more important consideration than the soundness of his judgment. He is beset by a dominating anxiety to "show off." He hurls Jove's thunderbolts with a magnificent carelessness of consequences. With age and experience he arrives at a more serious view of his responsibility, but in the days of his novitiate he often pronounces sentence with matchless effrontery, and decides upon the merit of authors with the splendid dogmatism of a literary Sir Oracle. The blame in such a case should rest, however, not so much with the youthful critic, who is but "feeling his feet," so to speak, and whose indiscretions are those of a rash inexperience, as with those who permit him to exercise such enormous powers. When a child inflicts some serious injury with firearms, the fault lies with the grown-up persons who, through carelessness or indiscretion, have allowed him to play with them.




CHAPTER VII.

BIAS.

N certain kinds of criticism, especially political and religious criticism, and, perhaps, in a minor degree, the criticism of conflicting schools of art, the difficulty of divesting the mind altogether of bias is very great. The zeal of party or creed is prejudicial to the formation of an absolutely impartial judgment. Mr. Matthew Arnold, in laying down *disinterestedness* as the one great rule of criticism,—that is, keeping aloof from ulterior, political, practical considerations, says, “We have the ‘Edinburgh Review,’ existing as an organ of the old Whigs, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the ‘Quarterly Review,’ existing as an organ of the Tories, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that; we have the ‘British Quarterly Review,’ existing as an organ of the

political Dissenters, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that. We have the 'Times,' existing as an organ of the common, satisfied, well-to-do Englishman, and for as much play of mind as may suit its being that. And so on, through all the various fractions, political and religious, of our society; every fraction has, as such, its organ of criticism." That is to say, critics with strong convictions look at all things through the spectacles of those convictions. Of course, each one, in such a case, writes for a sympathetic public. His readers expect to have things looked at and treated from their own point of view. They would feel that an outrage had been perpetrated on them if they were called upon to regard subjects looked at and treated from a contradictory point of view. For the public, as Mr. Ruskin has keenly pointed out, is an agglomeration of publics. There is, he tells us, a separate public for every picture and every book. "Appealed to with reference to any particular work, the public is that class of persons who possess the knowledge which it presupposes and the faculties to which it is addressed. With reference to a new edition of Newton's 'Principia,' the 'public' means *little more* than the Royal Society. With refer-

ence to one of Wordsworth's poems, it means all who have hearts. With reference to one of Moore's, all who have passions. With reference to the works of Hogarth, it means those who have worldly knowledge,—to the works of Giotto, those who have religious faith." It is just thus in criticism. There is the Conservative public looking for one sort of criticism, and the Radical public looking for another sort, and the Moderate Liberal public looking for another, and the High Church public, and the Low Church public, and the Roman Catholic public, and the orthodox Nonconforming public, and the Free Thought public, all looking for their own sorts of criticism ; which must run in their own grooves, echo their own principles, strengthen and encourage them in their own convictions. And all these descriptions of criticism are forthcoming. In politics, in religion, in literature, in art, the various schools of thought, the various sects and divisions, have all their own special guides, looking at questions from a fixed standpoint, and looking mostly in one unvarying direction. Critics of this kind are, more or less, under the influence of bias. No imputation on their honesty is conveyed in stating this plain fact. A man's *bona fides* is not impugned by reason of



his having strong leanings. Yet so long as he is an *interested* judge, so long as he is fired with the zeal of the partisan, no matter how sincere may be his convictions, his criticism is not of the ideal, nor even of the satisfactory kind. But, at the same time, disinterestedness is not often compatible with earnestness, and earnestness, in some proportion, is an essential of controversial criticism. If men did not feel on these burning questions of politics and religion, they would not trouble to criticise. Their criticism is the outcome of their convictions. It may be one-sided, but its one-sidedness is the main factor of its existence. The party critics uphold their own side, believing it to be right, and condemn the other side, believing it to be wrong. Their "play of mind" is necessarily limited by the conditions under which they exercise their calling. Unconscious though they may be of it, they are advocates in the judgment-seat, special pleaders on the bench. Provided the natural bias of the critic's mind does not degenerate into prejudice, and lead him to be spiteful, and vindictive, and consciously unfair, it is but one of those unavoidable drawbacks of political and religious criticism which do no great harm, *inasmuch* as it is being constantly subjected to the

modifying influence of bias of an opposite kind. The current of opinion in one direction is met by a current of opinion in the opposite. The different sections of the public choose their own current, and suffer themselves, for the most part, to drift with it. One set of papers has proclaimed Lord Beaconsfield to be a great and patriotic statesman and Mr. Gladstone a pernicious and unpatriotic demagogue; another set has declared Mr. Gladstone to be the greatest statesman of the age and Lord Beaconsfield a mere unscrupulous political adventurer. The High Church papers defend the Ritualistic movement as containing the vital germ of ecclesiastical truth; the Low Church papers rail against Ritualism as the outward and visible sign of superstition and error. Both sets of critics are honest enough, but they are partisans; and being partisans, it is impossible for them to exercise perfect impartiality in the judgment-seat.

In all criticism allowance must be made for honest differences of opinion. Apart from the distinct bias of strong convictions, we do not all of us look at things through the same glass.

"'Tis with our judgments as our watches; none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own."

Then it may be asked, "Who shall decide when

doctors disagree?" Who shall decide between critics giving utterance to diametrically opposite judgments? The reader may not in all cases have the knowledge or the skill to correct their conflicting opinions by a sufficiently trustworthy verdict of his own. He is confused and puzzled by recommendations at open variance with one another. Like the travellers who described the chameleon, all the critics may have a different, but an equally positive, tale to tell. "It's green," says one; "I'm sure it's black," declares another; while a third exclaims, "I'm confident it's blue." Each critical "taster" may have a pronouncement to make different from that of the others. Each guide may assure us that the path to which he points is the right one. The results of this contrariety of critical judgment are frequently amusing. One critic proclaims the author to be a genius; another denounces him as a dolt. "This is one of the most original and remarkable works we have read for years," says one authority: "The author of this volume of rubbish ought to be forthwith confined in a lunatic asylum," says another. Which of these two contains the truth, or the nearest approach to it, might be a difficult question for the bewildered reader to determine.

"Mr. Blank has evidently mistaken his vocation in taking to the stage," we hear from one quarter: "Mr. Blank bids fair to reach the very front rank of dramatic art," we hear with equal assurance from another. In the judgment of one newspaper, "Miss A. sang with incomparable brilliancy and expression;" in the judgment of its rival, "Miss A. was painfully deficient in expression."

These are not fictitious quotations, manufactured like the wonderful cures of the patent-pill vendor. Turner's works have been pointed out by some as "beautiful and profoundly truthful representations of nature," and by others as "executed without end, aim, or principle." Not so very long ago there were two conflicting sets of opinion with regard to Mr. Irving's skill as an actor, one set of critics denouncing him as utterly spoilt by staginess and mannerism, and the other declaring that his art triumphed over and hid any shortcomings of the kind. For it is not in politics alone that faction prevails. How the critics rage, for instance, over Mr. Burne Jones's pictures; how they raged over Wagner's "music of the future;" how they strove and tore each other over the Swinburnian school of poetry! Contrariety prevails among these our "tasters." Too

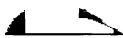
frequently they agree but to differ. "Nothing," said a critical review not long since, "could be finer than this novel for descriptive power, vigorous portrayal of character, penetrating insight into the minds of men, and a kindly and profound philosophy." A few days later, another critical review as authoritatively declared that the very same work was "dull and trivial," "commonplace in its descriptive passages," "unequal in its delineations of character," and "utterly beneath contempt if we regard the shallow commentary with which it is interlarded."

The "Satirist," scurrilous and libellous though it was, had one amusing feature—a column of "Comparative Criticism," in which the contradictory judgments of the reviewers were set forth in satirical juxtaposition. The diversity of opinion was often whimsically ludicrous. Jerdan tells us that he took up the sport, and adds that, but for the trouble of comparing so many organs, it would be a capital hit for any journal to revive the contrast, "and show how very little the judgment of readers ought to depend on the dicta of newspapers and magazines."


Some of these differences arise no doubt from ignorance, some from the bias of particular schools,

and some from the natural diversities of opinion. There is certainly not very much instruction to be got from views so conflicting. It needs a mind of a very receptive character to be able to accommodate two contradictory opinions at one and the same time. That is a unique intelligence which can admit of two simultaneous currents of opinion—a positive current and a negative current—without experiencing any inconvenience in the process.

The bias or the prejudice of critics has led to many notable instances of faulty and blundering judgment. In the "Curiosities of Literature," an interesting section is devoted to illustrations of faulty criticism on ancient writers. "It was given out that Homer had stolen from anterior poets whatever was most remarkable in the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey';" Sophocles was brought to trial by his children as a lunatic; and some, who censured the inequalities of the poet, have also condemned the vanity of Pindar, the rough verses of Æschylus, and Euripides for the conduct of his plots. Socrates, considered as the wisest and most moral of men, Cicero treated as an usurer, and the pedant Athenæus as illiterate. Aristotle has not been spared by the critics. Diogenes



Laertius, Cicero, and Plutarch have forgotten nothing that can tend to show his ignorance, his ambition, and his vanity. It has been said that Plato was so envious of the celebrity of Democritus that he proposed burning all his works; and Aristotle was agitated by the same passion against all the philosophers his predecessors. Virgil is destitute of invention, if we are to give credit to Pliny, Carbilus, and Seneca. Caligula has even denied him mediocrity. Horace censures the coarse humour of Plautus; and Horace in his turn has been blamed for the free use he made of the Greek minor poets. The majority of the critics regard Pliny's 'Natural History' only as a heap of fable. Pliny cannot bear with Diodorus and Vopiscus, and in one comprehensive criticism treats all the historians as narrators of fables. Dionysius of Halicarnassus severely criticises the style of Xenophon. Some have said of Cicero that he was cold in his extemporaneous effusions, artificial in his exordiums, trifling in his strained raillery, and tiresome in his digressions. Quintilian does not spare Seneca; and Demosthenes has, according to Hermippus, more of art than of nature. To Demades his orations appear too much laboured; others have thought him too




dry; and, if we may trust Æschines, his language is by no means pure."

Leaving the ancients, we may cull some farther curiosities from a later literature. Robert Greene, one of the early English dramatists, wrote of Shakspeare, "Here is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the rest of you, and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is, in his own conceit, the only shake-scene in the country." Thomas Rymer says of the scene between Brutus and Cassius in Shakespeare's "Julius Cæsar," "They are put there to play the bully and the buffoon, to show their activity of face and muscles. They are to play a prize, a trial of skill and hugging and swaggering, like two drunken Hectors for a twopenny reckoning." Dennis says of Shakespeare that "his lines are utterly void of celestial fire;" and even Shaftesbury speaks of his "rude unpolished style and antiquated phrase and wit." All this is, perhaps, not surprising when it is remembered that so great a scholar as Voltaire criticised Shakespeare with an almost savage contempt. Waller wrote of "Paradise Lost," "The blind old schoolmaster, John Milton, hath published

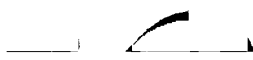
a tedious poem on the fall of man ; if its length be not considered a merit, it hath no other." William Winstanley, the author of "*Lives of the Most Famous English Poets*," says, too, of John Milton, that "his fame is gone out like a candle in a snuff, and his memory will always stink, which might have ever lived in honourable repute, had he not been a notorious traitor, and most impiously and villanously bely'd that blessed martyr king, Charles the First." A remarkable instance of want of appreciation of some of Milton's most exquisite work is found in Dr. Johnson's criticism on "*Lycidas*," wherein he says, "The diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers unpleasing. . . In this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth ; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting ; whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted, and its inherent improbability always forces dissatisfaction on the mind. Surely no man could have fancied that he read '*Lycidas*' with pleasure had he not known the author." Cowper very truly says of this, that "in his review of '*Lycidas*' Johnson has stamped some of the finest feathers of the Muse's wing under

his great foot." Horace Walpole compares Dante to "a Methodist parson in Bedlam," and Voltaire says, with unconcealed contempt, that there are people to be found who admire "feats of imagination as stupidly extravagant and barbarous" as those of the "Divine Comedy." In the first edition of the "Penny Cyclopædia," the writer who undertook the Life of Bunyan dismissed the subject in some twenty or thirty lines, in the course of which he contrived to stultify himself by the following unique piece of arrogant stupidity: "If a judgment is to be formed on the merits of a book by the number of times it has been reprinted and the many languages into which it has been translated, no production in English literature is equal to this coarse allegory. As a composition which has been extolled by Dr. Johnson, and which in our own times has received a very high critical opinion in its favour, it is hazardous to venture a disapproval, and we perhaps speak the opinion of a small minority when we confess that to us it appears mean, jejune, and wearisome."

One Martin Clifford wrote of Dryden, "Your writings are like a Jack-of-all-trades' shop; they have a variety, but nothing of value; and if thou



art not the dullest plant animal that ever the earth produced, all that I have conversed with are strangely mistaken in thee." And Wordsworth once made the assertion, "The verses of Dryden, once highly celebrated, are forgotten." Theobald said of Pope that "his wit was as thick as Tewkesbury mustard," however thick that might have been. Shenstone, writing of the "Dunciad," says, "The 'Dunciad' is doubtless Mr. Pope's dotage, flat in the whole, and including, with several tolerable lines, a number of weak, obscure, and even punning ones." Johnson was described by Curran as "a superstitious and brutish bigot, who, with the exception of his Dictionary, had done more harm to the English language than Gibbon himself." Horace Walpole says of Goldsmith's "She Stoops to Conquer," that it is a very wretched comedy; "the whole view of the piece is low humour, and no humour is in it." Hawkins's verdict on Goldsmith was that he was a mere literary drudge, equal to the task of compiling and translating, but little capable of original, and still less of poetical composition. This of the man who wrote "She Stoops to Conquer," "The Deserted Village," and "The Vicar of Wakefield!" Johnson wrote in the coldest terms



of Gray's two best odes ; but Johnson, though he professed to lay down principles of criticism, was not the soundest of critics, for he preferred Pope's "Iliad" to Homer's, called Fielding "a blockhead," and was quite blind to any merit in Thomson's "Seasons." Horace Walpole describes "Humphrey Clinker" as a *party* novel written by "the profligate hireling," Smollett ; and Warburton, after reading "Roderick Random," pronounced Smollett to be "a vagabond Scot, who writes nonsense ten thousand strong." Madame de Sévigné observed of Racine, that "as the taste for his works had come in with the rage for coffee, so with the rage for coffee would the taste disappear." Byron speaks of Cowper as "that maniacal Calvinist and coddled poet;" and "The Task" is described by Darwin as "egotistical," "prosaic," and "slovenly." A writer named Cooper declared himself to be of opinion that Dr. Aken-side was a poet of as genuine a genius as this kingdom ever produced, Shakespeare alone excepted. It was the opinion of Curran that Burke's mind was "like an over-decorated chapel, filled with gauds and shows and badly assorted ornaments." Of John Langhorne, while Hannah More wrote—

"Long as the rock shall rear its head on high,
And lift its bold front to the azure sky,
Long as these adamantine hills survive,
So long, harmonious Langhorne, shalt thou live ;"


the less appreciative Kelly predicted:—

"Triumphant dunce, illustrious Langhorne, rise,
And while whole worlds detest thee and despise,
With rage uncommon, cruelly deny
Thy hapless Muse even privilege to die."

Unfortunately for both prophets, Langhorne's Muse, harmonious or not, is well-nigh forgotten. The "Edinburgh Review" said of Wordsworth's "Ode to the Daisy" that it was "flat and feeble," like "the theme of an unpractised schoolboy." His "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" was said to be "beyond all doubt the most illegible and unintelligible part of the publication." * It was in the same "Review" that Jeffrey's blundering criticism appeared on "The Excursion." As this is often referred to as an illustration of the erroneous judgments of the critics, a few extracts from it may not prove unacceptable:—

* For some of the above quotations I am indebted to Russell's "Book of Authors," and an article on "The Curiosities of Criticism" in the "Gentleman's Magazine" for June 1880.

“This will never do. . . . It is longer, weaker, and tamer, than any of Mr. Wordsworth’s other productions, with less boldness of originality, and less even of the simplicity and lowliness of tone which wavered so prettily in the ‘Lyrical Ballads’ between silliness and pathos. We have imitations of Cowper, and even of Milton here, engrafted on the natural drawl of the Lakers—and all diluted into harmony by that profuse and irrepressible wordiness which deluges all the blank verse of this school of poetry, and lubricates and weakens the whole structure of their style. . . . The case of Mr. Wordsworth, we perceive, is now manifestly hopeless; and we give him up as altogether incurable, and beyond the power of criticism. . . . We now see clearly how the case stands; and making up our minds, though with the most sincere pain and reluctance, to consider him as finally lost to the good cause of poetry, shall endeavour to be thankful for the occasional gleams of tenderness and beauty which the natural force of his imagination and affection must still shed over all his productions. . . . It appears to us to be absolutely impossible that any one who had lived or mixed familiarly with men of literature and ordinary judgment in poetry could ever have fallen into such gross faults, or so long mistaken them for beauties. The volume before us, if we were to describe it very shortly, we should characterise as a tissue of moral and devotional ravings, in which innumerable changes are rung upon a few very simple and familiar ideas, but with such an accompaniment of long words, long sentences, and unwieldy phrases—



and such a hubbub of strained raptures and fantastical sublimities, that it is often extremely difficult for the most skilful and attentive student to obtain a glimpse of the author's meaning—and altogether impossible for an ordinary reader to conjecture what he is about. . . . His laudable zeal for the efficacy of his preachments, he very naturally mistakes for the ardour of poetical inspiration; and while dealing out the high words and glowing phrases which are so readily supplied by themes of this description, can scarcely avoid believing that he is eminently original and impressive. All sorts of commonplace notions and expressions are sanctified in his eyes by the sublime ends for which they are employed; and the mystical verbiage of the methodist pulpit is repeated till the speaker entertains no doubt that he is the elected organ of divine truth and persuasion."


Jeffrey then goes into a detailed analysis of the poem, winding up his unappreciative review as follows:—

"The whole substance of the work is infected with a puerile ambition of singularity engrafted on an unlucky predilection for truisms; and an affected passion for simplicity and humble life most awkwardly combined with a taste for mystical refinements, and all the gorgeousness of obscure phraseology. His taste for simplicity is evinced by sprinkling up and down his interminable declamations, a few descriptions of baby-houses, and of old hats with wet brims; and his amiable partiality for *humble* life by assuring us that a wordy rhetorician who

talks about Thebes and allegorises all the heathen mythology, was once a pedlar, and making him break in upon his magnificent orations with two or three awkward notices of something that he had seen when selling winter raiment about the country, or of the change in the state of society which had almost annihilated his former calling."

A quotable story is told of the above. The critic having boasted that he had *crushed* "The Excursion," Southey, who heard of it, exclaimed, "He crush 'The Excursion!' Tell him he might as well fancy that he could crush Skiddaw." And so the result has shown. It was the "Edinburgh Review," again, that pronounced Coleridge's "Christabel" "a miserable piece of coxcombray and shuffling," and the publication of a volume of this poem and "Kubla Khan" "one of the most notable pieces of impertinence of which the press has lately been guilty, and one of the boldest experiments that has ever been made on the patience or the understanding of the public." Says the reviewer: "With one exception, there is literally not one couplet in the publication before us which would be reckoned poetry, or even sense, were it found in the corner of a newspaper or upon the window of an inn."

Home, the author of "Douglas," would never admit that there was any merit in Burns's poetry. Campbell sent his "Hohenlinden," in the first instance, to the "Greenock Advertiser," but it did not come up to the standard of the editor, who said that "poetry was evidently not the *forte* of the contributor." The "Church of England Quarterly Review" said of the scholarly Hallam, "In philosophical analysis Mr. Hallam is not successful. He fails in his criticism of poetry and romance. With English poetry, excepting two or three of its greater names, we deem him to be superficially acquainted." The same "Review" once said, "We shall regard it as one of the most melancholy evidences of the value of all pure and healthful literature if the writings of Mr. Carlyle continue to have an enduring hold upon the popular mind." Carlyle himself describes how the "Athenæum" "placidly, and with some elaboration, set him down"—on the production of his "French Revolution"—"as blockhead and strenuous failure;" the last words of the review being, "Readers, have we made out our case?" "I read it," says Carlyle, "without pain, or pain the least to signify; laid it aside for a day or two; then one morning, in some strait about our



breakfast tea-kettle, slipped the peccant number under that, and had my cup of excellent hot tea from it." The "Quarterly Review," in its usual truculent style, described Charlotte Brontë as "a person with great mental powers, combining a total ignorance of the habits of society, a great coarseness of taste, and a heathenish doctrine of religion." Tennyson did not uniformly succeed in pleasing the critics in his earlier days. "Blackwood," protesting against the extravagance of praise which had been splashed upon him, said, "The worst of it is that they make the bespattered not only feel, but look ridiculous; he seems as absurd as an image in a tea-garden, and bedizened with faded and fantastic garlands; the public cough on being told he is a poet, for he has much more the appearance of a post." An extract or two from the "Quarterly" of 1833 will show what the Tory Review thought of the new aspirant for the honours of poesy. It is interesting, read in the light of his subsequent fame. The reviewer in an ironic strain talks about introducing "to the admiration of our more sequestered readers a new prodigy of genius—another and a brighter star of that galaxy or *milky way* of poetry of which the lamented Keats

was the harbinger." Then he proceeds through fifteen pages of "chaff" to ridicule every idea and every expression which, by ingenuity and malice prepense, can be tortured into material for his banter. For instance, quoting this verse—

"Sweet as the noise, in parchèd plains,
Of bubbling wells that fret the stones
(If any sense in me remains),
Thy words will be—thy cheerful tones
As welcome to my crumbling bones ;"

he fastens on the words, "If any sense in me remains." "This doubt," he says, "is inconsistent with the opening stanza of the piece, and, in fact, too modest; we take upon ourselves to reassure Mr. Tennyson that, even after he shall be dead and buried, as much '*sense*' will still remain as he has now the good fortune to possess." "The accumulation of tender images in the following lines appears not less wonderful :—

'Remember you that pleasant day
When, after roving in the woods
('Twas April then), I came and lay
Beneath those gummy chestnut-buds

'A water-rat from off the bank
Plunged in the stream. With idle care,

Down looking through the sedges rank,
I saw your troubled image there.

“If you remember, you had set
Upon the narrow casement-edge
A long green box of mignonette,
And you were leaning on the ledge.’

The poet's truth to Nature in his ‘gummy’ chestnut buds, and to Art in the ‘long green box’ of mignonette—and that masterly touch of likening the first intrusion of love into the virgin bosom of the miller's daughter to the plunging of the water-rat into the mill-dam—these are beauties which, we do not fear to say, equal anything even in Keats.” The strain of mockery is kept up throughout the remarks on the “Hesperides,” “The Palace of Art,” and “A Dream of Fair Women.” An extract from the references to the last-named poem shows the almost brutal realism of the critic's mind:—

“‘Dimly could I descry
The stern black-bearded kings with wolfish eyes,
Watching to see me die.
The tall masts quivered as they lay afloat ;
The temples, and the people, and the shore ;
One drew a sharp knife through my tender throat—
Slowly,—and nothing more !’

What touching simplicity! what pathetic resignation! he cut my throat—‘*nothing more.*’ One might indeed ask ‘what *more*’ she would have?”

Reference may not be altogether out of place here to the severe criticisms passed upon each other by Bulwer Lytton and Tennyson many years ago. Bulwer Lytton, in the “New Timon,” referred to Tennyson’s

“Jingling medley of purloined conceits,
Out-babying Wordsworth and out-glittering Keats;
Where all the airs of patch-work pastoral chime
To drown the ears in Tennysonian rhyme!”

And he further jeered at the laureate as “school-miss Alfred.” Tennyson replied in some caustic verses in “Punch,” wherein he referred to the author of the “New Timon” as “the padded man that wears the stays,” and went on to criticise him in eight or nine stinging verses, of which a couple or so may be worth quoting. “It’s you,” he says,

“Who killed the girls and thrilled the boys
With dandy pathos when you wrote;
O Lion! you that made a noise
And shook a mane *en papillotes*.”

And once you tried the Muses too,—
 You failed, sir ; therefore now you turn ;
 You fall on those who are to you
 As captain is to subaltern.

What profits now to understand
 The merits of a spotless shirt—
 A dapper boot—a little hand—
 If half the little soul is dirt ?

A Timon you ! nay, nay, for shame ;
 It looks too arrogant a jest—
 The fierce old man to take *his* name—
 You bandbox ! Off, and let him rest."

To conclude these examples let it be briefly noted that Jeffrey treated Madame de Staël, when "Delphine" was published, as a person whose writings would be extremely dangerous, "were not her stupidity still more remarkable than her depravity;" that the "Quarterly Review" predicted of Dickens's works that "an ephemeral popularity would be followed by early oblivion;" and that the "Edinburgh Review" said of Ruskin, "he made a fame by hanging to the skirts of a famous artist."

These curiosities of biassed criticism, professional and otherwise, might be multiplied *ad infinitum*. In some cases the bias takes the


form of a deliberate intention to "write up" or "write down" a work. Artemus Ward has given an amusing sketch of the venal character of the American press, and the frankness of their negotiations. "Sum editors," he says, "cum in krowds to my Show, and then axt me ten sents a line for Puffs. I objectid to payin', but they sed ef I didn't down with the dust thay'd wipe my Show from the face of the earth. Thay sed the Press was the Arkymedian Leaver which moved the wurd." There is no such venality as this in the English press. A man may puff his friend's work, but he does it from no mercenary consideration. It would be absolutely impossible to buy a favourable notice in any respectable English journal. Whatever the faults of criticism may be, its good opinion is not a marketable commodity. Nor are authors or actors allowed to write their own criticisms as Mrs. Garrick said ingenuously that "David always did." That criticism occasionally falls into the error of puffing cannot be questioned, and of all kinds of puff, that which comes under the designation of what Mr. Puff calls the "Impartial Critique," is the most misleading and *the most mischievous.*

Lord Macaulay says, "Though we have no apprehensions that puffing will ever confer permanent reputation on the undeserving, we still think its influence most pernicious. Men of real merit will, if they persevere, at last reach the station to which they are entitled, and intruders will be ejected with contempt and derision. But it is no small evil that the avenues to fame should be blocked up by a swarm of noisy, pushing, elbowing pretenders, who, though they will not ultimately be able to make good their own entrance, hinder, in the meantime, those who have a right to enter." There are some so-called critics intensely optimistic in their nature, who confer and distribute literary reputation to such an extent that, as Sydney Smith once said of Gifford, they leave none for themselves. It cannot, perhaps, be said, as was said in Dryden's day—

"In our scribbling times
No fool can want a sot to praise his rhymes ;
The flattest work has ever in the Court
Met with some zealous ass for its support ;
And in all times, a forward, scribbling fop
Has found some greater fool to cry him up."

But if these lines would be extravagant applied to our own day, there is some fault to be found


with the indiscriminate distribution of praise which finds its motive in the interests of friendship or cliquism. The bias of particular coteries is not favourable to the higher kind of criticism. No matter whether the clique or party be political or artistic, or what not, the tendency of its judgments is to exalt those of its own inclining and depreciate those who hold different views. This used to be much more noticeable than it is now. The bias of party at one time shaped itself into ludicrous self-applause and vindictive condemnation. There were in the literary world of not very long ago, Montagues and Capulets, between whom raged feuds none the less deadly because they were veiled in civil phrase, and because the hand that wielded the weapon was gloved in the softest velvet. Happily, the vendetta of letters is becoming a thing of the past. The more glaring evils of critical cliquism have disappeared. Now and then, one meets with an indiscreet panegyric of some worthless work, or an ignorant puff of some wretched player, but blundering verdicts of this kind rarely appear in periodicals of any reputation or standing. To meet with puffing in all the wild luxuriance of its perfect growth one must go to America. The following is an exact and un-



embellished copy of a gushing criticism which appeared not long ago in the leading paper of one of the Western cities:—"The voice of this divine cantatrice would be capable, in the most literal sense of Milton's majestic words, of 'creating a soul under the ribs of death.' It now rises in mellifluous trills, and now falls like the dying whispers of a melodious seraph. Her power compasses all variations of human mood, and her ripe intelligence grapples with every phase of musical expression. Nothing is too lofty for her reach, nothing too simple for her condescension. The souls of her listeners are wafted at her sweet will, and their emotions moulded under the influence of her enrapturing song. *Nothing like it has been heard outside the gates of Paradise*; it leaves us prostrate in a delirium of satisfied joy, and for years after, the memory of its ecstatic strains will haunt every waking hour and people our dreams with melody." The subject of these flattering remarks was a third-rate actress in an opera bouffe company.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ANONYMITY OF CRITICISM.


N criticism, as in most other departments of journalistic opinion, custom has given its august sanction to the use of the impersonal "we." At all events it is so in England. It is an exception to the general rule for a critic to put his name to his article, or even initials by which he may be identified. To all intents and purposes he is an anonymous writer. His individual opinion, whatever it may be worth, goes forth to the world with all the authority and influence of the newspaper or magazine for which he writes. It is not altogether unnatural that people who are severely handled by the critics should cry out against this system. Half a century ago, when the personality of journalism was nothing short of a public scandal, there may have been good reason for their indignant protest against the licence afforded to anonymous scrib-

blers. But in the conditions of journalism to-day there is very little which can be urged with cogency against the practice of publishing unsigned criticisms. Entire responsibility for whatever is written is assumed by the editor or conductors of the paper in which the criticism appears. The author who considers himself unfairly dealt with can obtain the same redress against the publisher as he could have obtained against the critic. No doubt the anonymous system magnifies the weight and importance of individual opinion, and if incompetent men are employed, a grievous injury may be done, not only to the person criticised but to public taste as well. As a witty writer has put it :—

“How much an editor would lose, if he,
Abandoning mysterious incogs,
Wrote little ‘I’ instead of mighty ‘We!’
For when a man the public memory jogs
In a critique severe, or slashing article,
To stamp upon the thunderbolt ‘Tim Scroggs’
Would spoil its efficacy no small particle!
There is much wisdom in that same plurality,
It neutralises personal rascality,
And shrouds from scorn his individuality!”

A respectable journal, however, takes care, or at any rate endeavours, to employ as its critics

competent and impartial men. If its selection is not always fortunate,—if it sometimes entrusts the delicate work of passing literary judgment to an ignorant, or partial, or careless man, it is bound to pay the penalty in loss of influence among those who are competent to review and correct its verdicts. The idea that critics themselves are afraid of putting their names to their work is simply absurd. In the present position of criticism there is nothing to warrant the presumption of such cowardice. The only people who, in a system of signed articles would be likely to shrink from the ordeal, are those who are conscious of their inability to deal with the subject entrusted to them. So far as such a system kept impostors out of the field, and curbed the licence of captious incompetence, it would possess a distinct advantage over the existing one. But the prominence given to individual opinion, on the other hand, would savour of presumption and vanity. There is something a little offensive in the idea of any man, not of the first rank and authority, setting himself up as a judge and distributing praise and blame with unsolicited freedom. With such a multitude of organs of opinion as exist now—*days*, it is simply impossible for a tithe of them



to obtain as their critics men of known and publicly recognised authority. They are bound, to a greater or less extent, to depend on the assistance of those writers who, though sufficiently well-informed for all ordinary purposes, have not had the good fortune to win for themselves a noteworthy and trusted individuality. Nothing would be gained by these comparatively unknown critics putting their names to their judgments, while the fact of their doing so would in many cases provoke a ready sneer at what would be called their impertinence.

The fact that the anonymous system does invest with the nimbus of importance the utterances of a fallible individual, is an argument for the exercise of great care in the selection of its critics by a public journal, but it is hardly an argument for the supersession of the system. It is sometimes said that the adoption of signed criticisms would compel the employment of men of known authority, competence, and impartiality. The probability is, that it would make very little practical difference in the quality of the critics employed, except perhaps in the case of those obscure journals—if any such there be—which now find it economical to combine junior report-

ing with musical criticism, and to utilise the spare time of their intelligent compositors in the reviewing of books. All the higher class reviews and newspapers exhibit a laudable anxiety to place their critical departments in competent hands, and it is difficult to see that they could do much more, even if it were the fashion for critics to append their names to their articles. It does not follow that because a man is unknown to fame, he is therefore disqualified for the position of a critic. Some of the ablest criticisms that have ever appeared have been written by men whose names were entirely unknown outside the office of the publication in which their articles were printed. If any one has a ground of complaint it is they, inasmuch as the journal, in its collective and impersonal character, gets all the credit of their individual work. One of the strongest arguments, indeed, in favour of signed criticisms, is that individual merit would no longer be merged, as it is now, in what has been called the "wegotism" of the press. It no doubt suits the pockets of proprietors to keep up this impersonal character, inasmuch as the individual writer is unable to obtain a direct hold upon the *public*, whereby his commercial value would be

enhanced. The English system of journalism involves self-effacement on the part of those who do the actual work, but although this is a hardship, and in many cases an injustice to those concerned, it possesses the counter-balancing advantage of lending a dignity and a loftiness to the function of journalism, which might be gravely imperilled by the adoption of any other plan.

The late Lord Lytton discussed this subject some years ago in "England and the English," and the conclusion at which he arrived was adverse to anonymous criticism. He wound up a lengthy argument very pungently by saying, "There are only two classes of men to whom the anonymous is really desirable: the perfidious gentleman who fears to be cut by the friends he injures, and the lying blackguard who dreads to be horsewhipped by the man he maligns." As has been already said, the conditions of journalism have changed very much since this was written. The "lying blackguard" no longer finds a vehicle for his abuse, save in the very scum of the press, where it carries no weight and does no injury. To the honest and capable critic it matters very little whether his productions be signed or not;

he certainly has no particular motive for screening himself behind the shield of anonymity ; nor, on the other hand, has he any particular wish to thrust himself before the public in the self-assumed character of a judicial authority.

It is, unfortunately, too true that advantage has sometimes been taken of the shelter thus afforded to indulge in spiteful and malevolent attacks. It is true, too, that the system may here and there give some encouragement to the delivery of slap-dash judgments, through the critic being free from any sense of personal responsibility. But these evils are largely counterbalanced by the desire of the conductors of the press to gain a reputation for fairness and honesty. Nothing does a critical paper more harm than to have its criticisms impugned by thoughtful and informed readers, and there is consequently a constant endeavour to keep its articles free from the least suspicion of partiality or carelessness.

CHAPTER IX.

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A CRITIC.

AND what are the qualifications of a true critic? What is it he has to learn, and to put in practice? What principles are to guide him, what knowledge is he to possess, what rules has he to keep in view? Well, there is nothing new to be laid down under these heads. To quote Mr. Leslie Stephen, one would scarcely ask for originality in such a case, any more than one would desire a writer on ethics to invent new laws of morality. "We require neither Pope nor Aristotle to tell us that critics should not be pert nor prejudiced; that fancy should be regulated by judgment; that apparent facility comes by long training; that the sound should have some conformity to the meaning; that genius is often envied; and that dulness is frequently beyond the reach of reproof." Still, in the practical work of

criticism, certain qualifications are, or should be, indispensable ; and though it may be but a thrice-told tale to enumerate them, they ought to find a place in any book about critics. It is not necessary that the critic should be able to execute the work upon which he passes judgment. The talent of judging, as the elder Disraeli says, may exist separately from the power of execution. A man may be competent to criticise a picture who never mixed a colour or handled a brush in his life : that is, he may be able, from his own knowledge of nature, to see what has been aimed at by the artist, and how nearly the aim has been realised. Or a critic may be capable of criticising an actor, who, if put upon the stage himself, could not utter half a dozen lines with the faintest approach to dramatic effect. If the work of criticism were confined to those only who could produce great works themselves, half, and more than half, of its utility would instantly vanish, since the producers of great works are very, very few, and there would be scarcely any one qualified to point out the beauties, or balance them with the faults, of works of exceptional power. The critic, however, should be a man of taste, with fine natural discrimination, *and an instinctive perception of intellectual power,*


beauty of workmanship, worthiness of aim, and earnestness of purpose. So far it may be said of him as of the poet, *nascitur non fit*.

“Both must alike from heaven derive their light,
These born to judge, as well as those to write.”

Apart from this natural gift of taste, the critic has it in his power to acquire other scarcely less indispensable qualifications. He should be a man of information,—not only a student of books, but a reader of men, acquainted with the springs of human actions, familiar with the developments of human passion. He should be absolutely free from prejudice. He should be guided by a conscientious anxiety to find out what the man whose work he criticises had in view, the object of his book or picture, the extent to which that object was worth attainment, and the extent to which it has been attained. He should be free from physical ailments, and the infirmities of temper to which they give rise. The best of critics may have a liver which will make him almost the worst. Isaac Disraeli has written an interesting paper on the influence of bad temper in criticism, as exemplified in the case of the notorious Dennis. An attack of biliousness, or a


fit of what our forefathers used to call the spleen, is capable of completely warping a man's judgment, and rendering his criticism false and unfair. "Everything looks yellow to the jaundiced eye." Health—the sound mind in the sound body—is therefore one of the essentials of calm, dispassionate, unbiassed criticism. The true critic, again, should be keenly alive to the importance of his work and the largeness of the influence he wields. He should remember that his censure may have far-reaching consequences. He should be just, but where the faults and shortcomings he condemns violate no principles of propriety, he should temper his justice with mercy. One of the great needs—the crying, loud-voiced, urgent needs of criticism, is more charity. There is too great a readiness to fasten upon the weak points of a work, to magnify its failings, to tear the whole fabric into a thousand shreds because of an imperfection in the warp here, or a knot in the web there. True charity need not condone impudent imposture, or extenuate insidious vice. It need not spare ignorance, or tolerate folly, or justify the trickery of slovenly work. But it can temper with self-restraint the severity of *judgments* which may, but for its benign influence,

inflict unnecessary pain. The object of the true critic should not be to inflict pain. Smartness and pungency—cutting phrases and pointed jests—are not the ends for which he is set in the judgment-seat. He should never forget, whatever temptations there may be to the contrary, that his chief business is to guide public taste, to point out what is worthy of admiration, to discover and encourage unknown merit. And to this end his principles should be too deeply rooted to be affected by the passing whims of literary caprice or artistic fashion, without his being too obstinately prejudiced to deny the merits of an original work, simply because it departs from the recognised and conventional groove. Above all, he should be in harmony with Nature, for it is only the critic whose soul is strung in sympathetic unison with Nature who is capable of rising to the height of the great argument of the masterpieces of genius. Without that sympathy he cannot decipher the spiritual workings in Hamlet's puzzled mind, or realise the terrible pathos of the Titanic overthrow of poor, mad Lear. Without it, he cannot detect in the great artists of the stage—



“A voice below the voice,
And a height beyond the height.”

Without it, the wizard spell of the romancer is shorn for him of half its wondrous charm, and the characters of fiction are but the lifeless puppets of a grosser clay. If he be not in harmony with Nature he can never feel as the poet feels, never rise to the meaning of the painter's sublimest aims. He cannot enter into the magical mystery of a Turner's sunsets, or feel the devotional rapture of a Titian's celestial themes. And even in the commonplace circumstances of life, its struggles, its faults, its fatuous follies, and its teeming, sordid, selfish sins, as recorded with the caricaturist's pencil or the humourist's pen, the critic needs to be familiar with the workings of the human heart in all its varying moods, before he can enter into the point of the jest, or catch the spirit and philosophy of the laughter. One touch of Nature makes the critic kin with those great authors and artists who have gone to Nature herself for their inspiration. Without that touch he can never fathom the fulness of their meaning, and his words are but as the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.




“First follow Nature, and your judgments frame
By her just standard, which is still the same :
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchanged, and universal light,
Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,
At once the source, the end, the test of art.”

Thus wrote Alexander Pope a century and three quarters ago, and the utterance, which was a truism then, is none the less a truism to-day. He also put into a few pithy and antithetical lines those commonplaces which in all ages indicate the qualifications of a critic:—

“Unbiassed or by favour or by spite,
Not dully prepossessed, nor blindly right ;
Though learned, well-bred, and though well-bred, sincere,
Modestly bold, and humanly severe :
Who to a friend his faults can freely show,
And gladly praise the merit of a foe.
Blest with a taste exact, yet unconfined ;
A knowledge both of books and human-kind ;
Gen’rous converse ; a soul exempt from pride ;
And love to praise, with reason on his side.”

The same principles apply to the informal criticisms in which most people, of any intellectual attainments at all, occasionally indulge. They read, they judge, and within their own circle they influence. The truer their criticism is, the more

do they improve the intellectual standard of those who come in contact with them. But it is not always those, in private any more than in professional criticism, who are most glib with the cant phrases of critical jargon that possess the needful qualifications for passing judgment. A man may easily perk his head on one side, assume a look of knowingness, talk about "middle distance," "body-colour," and "atmosphere," and hum and haw for all the world as if he really knew something about not only the principles, but also the technique of art. There is a sort of superficial criticism which is very common in picture galleries and drawing-rooms, and which is based upon a combination of effrontery and ignorance. You hear practitioners of this school flippantly pronouncing of a picture that it wants harmony, or of an actor that he is deficient in repose, when often enough these are but (to them) meaningless scraps of the terminology of criticism which they have picked up much in the same way as a parrot learns to say "scratch a poll," and "pretty Polly." So, too, with books. Tennyson is pronounced to be failing by drawing-room critics who have hastily glanced over a few *extracts* from his latest volume in a current and



acrimonious review. The trick of it all is easily learnt. It would not be very difficult to compile a phrase-book of criticism,—a sort of vademecum for amateur critics, by the aid of which a person of ordinary intelligence would be able to achieve wonders, backed up with a pragmatic tone and a smattering of literary gossip. Most people, however, who care to give utterance to their critical views at all, would wish to aim at something higher than this wretched make-believe sort of work. In whatever the critic judges, whether he be the critic of the drawing-room or the critic of the public journal, his judgment should be *thorough*,—to use a fine old word, the spirit of which is too apt to be forgotten in this age of intellectual veneer. Those who read a book, or look at a picture, or witness a piece of acting, should try to understand it, to grapple with its minutest subtleties, to find out, not only what is on the surface, but what undercurrents of motive there are,—what the author, or artist, or actor has striven to convey. Let credit be given for conscientious work. Let it be constantly borne in mind that decorous dulness does no great harm, but that the most brilliant work, if its tendency be to corrupt and deprave, deserves no

quarter. Every day the importance and the influence of criticism, for good or evil, are extending. Every day some new voice claims to speak with authority. And the work is, on the whole, fairly and diligently done. If it is not perfect, it is, at least, far less careless and unscrupulous than it was half a century ago. Its influence is ever widening. As work multiplies, people are dependent more and more upon the critic's guidance. Thus criticism is coming to play, even more than in the past, a great part in the history of culture and intellectual progress. In spite of all its contradictions, its faults, and its occasional spitefulness, it exercises an enormous influence in shaping popular taste, in leading the popular judgment, and in keeping Art and Literature free from what is enervating, and debasing and vile. "What a great part criticism does perform"—to quote the wise words of the author of "Friends in Council"—"is known to all men. What a still greater it might perform is appreciated by those who would have it blended with knowledge, governed by self-restraint, and enlightened by charity."

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